

THE RETURNING INACTIVE CATHOLIC PARISHIONER  
A STUDY AND ANALYSIS

by

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Submitted in partial fulfillment of the requirements  
For the degree of Doctor of Ministry

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ST. MARY SEMINARY AND GRADUATE SCHOOL OF THEOLOGY

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## DEDICATION

This project is dedicated to all the pastors who need the support and affirmation in their sacred duty as disciples of Christ. Their compassion and openness to the returning inactive Catholic will be a source of hope and strength for them to continue to be vibrant leaders in these very challenging times.

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

My deepest gratitude to the staff members of my parish for their patience, kindness and technical assistance the past three years. Their support, especially in times of illness and frustration, helped me to persevere. I would like to thank sincerely all the faculty and staff of St. Mary Seminary for their encouragement and guidance. Special thanks to Father Mark Latkovich, Fr. Thomas Tift, Fr. Donald Dunson, Sister Mary Ann Wiesemann-Mills and Alan Rome for their mentoring and friendship. Acknowledgement must be given to my parishioners that volunteered for the focus groups, survey, and interviews that gave me so much insight into their lives. Thanks to Maureen Coughlin, Amy Gaffney, Pat Hoffman, Joyce Becker, Bev Neuman, Tricia Priel, Lisa Pilazzo, Mary Nave, Marion Kessler, and Sue Adams for their invaluable assistance in recording, typing, editing, proof reading and encouraging me to conclude the project

Lastly a special thanks to my classmates, brothers in Christ, who as pastors and now close friends showed me kindness and genuine friendship. The shared joy, laughter, and the challenges of our studies have formed a permanent bond of friendship and support.

# The Returning Inactive Catholic A Study and Analysis

## Abstract

by

Richard A. Gonser

This project identifies the reasons why formerly active Catholics are returning to active membership in the 21<sup>st</sup> century parish. The research will examine the ministerial context of the Roman Catholic pastor in welcoming the returning inactive Catholic to the Church. The years following the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council in 1965 have witnessed the phenomenon of decreasing Church membership in general, Mass attendance, and the gradual return of formerly inactive Catholics to churches of their choosing. What are the motivating factors that cause them to return and what do they seek from their new parish, are questions that will be explored and analyzed in this project.

The returning inactive Catholic has an ecclesiology of Church and parish that is far removed from the reality of the 21<sup>st</sup> century parish. The positive factors (such as community, hospitality, spirituality) and negative factors (such as limited formal education in Church doctrine, liturgy, morality, marriage legislation) will be identified as elements within the ministerial context that directly impact the returning inactive parishioner and the pastoral staff.

The project will first define the theological concepts of the Church and the parish using the documents of the Second Vatican Council and the writings, in particular of

Avery Dulles, Sabbas Killian and James Coriden. After a survey of theological journals and books from the 1980's to the present time, the project will focus on an exploratory study. The goals of the study are to identify the primary variables that motivate the returning parishioner. The use of focus groups, a self-administered survey and individual interviews will form the basic data for analysis.

This project will use the statistical Likert scales, quantitative, open and close-ended statements, and personal interviews to provide the data for analysis and pastoral reflection. A core group of 64 respondents were chosen to profile the required age and length of stay in the participating parish. In this project the research questions and the hypotheses are analyzed in terms of descriptive statistics and qualitative data. The primary motivating factors are identified in this study by tables and bar charts.

The conclusions of the study suggest that there are three distinctive reasons that facilitate re-entry in the parish and active participation. New parishioners are searching for a friendly faith community, a welcoming pastor who has a good liturgical and preaching style, and finally, opportunities to be involved in ministry within and beyond the parish community. Parishioners will stay to maintain and deepen a relationship with God. They need the support of their families, namely parents and spouses, to be active. Community involvement is also a strong factor for continuing membership.

The project uses these variables to suggest some possible new directives that the pastor can employ in his first meeting with a potential parishioner. The project's ultimate goal is to integrate these major motivations into a pastoral approach that is non-threatening, supportive, and welcoming.

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

COPYRIGHT.....	ii
SIGNATURE SHEET.....	iii
DEDICATION .....	iv
ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS.....	v
ABSTRACT.....	vi
LIST OF TABLES.....	viii
INTRODUCTION.....	1
Goals of the Study	
CHAPTER	
I. VATICAN II COUNCIL AND THE CHURCH.....	9
Lumen Gentium and the Images of the Church.....	10
Church in the Modern World.....	20
Models of the Church.....	22
Theological Models of the Parish.....	31
II. WHY CATHOLICS ARE RETURNING TO THE CHURCH.....	48
III. RESEARCH DESIGN AND METHODOLOGY.....	65
Background and History.....	66
Pretesting and Administering Focus Groups.....	69
Self-Administered Survey...Its Composition and Testing.....	80
Individual Interviews.....	87



## TABLE OF CONTENTS –Continued

CHAPTER	PAGE
IV. DESCRIPTIVE NARRATION AND ANALYSIS OF SURVEY.....	94
Profile of the Respondents to the Survey.....	94
Spiritual Needs of the Respondent.....	96
Open-ended Responses.....	101
V. REFLECTIONS, EVALUATION AND CONCLUSION.....	110
Project’s Strengths.....	110
Areas for further Research and Reflection.....	112
How has this Project enhanced my Ministry.....	118
How this Project can effect those in Ministry.....	122
Contributions to Field of Practical Theology.....	125
APPENDIX	
A. Self-administered survey.....	130
B. Vibrant Parish Life Demographics Report, 2/27/2003.....	139
C. Parish History.....	145
D. Positive and Negative Aspects of St. Julie Billiart Parish.....	146

## APPENDIX-CONTINUED

F. Church Attitude Data Code.....	151
G. Sample of Pretest and Test of Focus Groups.....	154
H. Letter of Introduction for Survey Participants.....	164

## ANNOTATED PROJECT BIBLIOGRAPHY

1. Works Cited.....	165
2. Further Readings.....	174

## LIST OF TABLES AND CHARTS

Table	Page
1 Marital Status.....	94
2 Age of Respondents.....	95
3 Gender of Respondents.....	95
4 Length of time in parish.....	96
5 Why adults are returning to active membership.....	97
6 Statements about the Church.....	98
7 Reasons for joining the parish.....	99
8 Reasons you would leave this parish for another.....	109

### Chart

1 Why do people stay connected.....	103
1B Why do people stay connected.....	104
1C Why do people stay connected.....	105
1D Why do people stay connected.....	106
1E Why do people stay connected.....	106

## INTRODUCTION

The idea for this paper began almost twenty-five years ago when St. Julie Billiart parish was canonically established in the city of N. Ridgeville, Ohio. As the founding pastor, I was given the privilege and the responsibility to establish a small faith community in one of the fastest growing suburban cities adjacent to the metropolitan area of Cleveland. It appeared at first glance to be a wonderful opportunity for ministry because there would be plenty of parishioners willing and anxious to build a new parish. The first task was to locate temporary sites for Sunday Liturgies and for a rectory-office facility. Once that was quickly settled, thanks to the generosity of local officials and a building developer, the second phase was initiated. The second task was to locate all the Catholic families within the three-mile boundaries of the parish and then inform them of the new parish's existence.

Back in 1978 it was still the accepted practice that all the families living within the boundaries of a newly established parish would automatically be members and would no longer be affiliated with their original parish. That practice did not hold true for membership at St. Julie Billiart. The primary reason for this was that the new parish would not have a day school, whereas St. Peter's parish, just two miles away, would continue to maintain a very large and efficiently operated parochial school. This very important difference was the reason why large numbers of families stayed with the original parish instead of switching over to the new parish. The pastor quickly understood this when he

began house visitation the day the parish was established on August 15, 1978. "When are you going to open your school?" was the first question the pastor heard that day. Nobody appeared to be concerned that there was no permanent church building or rectory or staff. The primary interest lay in the education of their children. What the parents apparently wanted was a school community first and a faith community second.

Learning that the primary concern of the new parish's parishioners was a new school necessitated some innovative pastoral approaches. The effort to keep these families from returning to the mother church was compounded by the fact that most of the new families who were moving into the city were unaware of the new parish in town. Many automatically joined the large parish with the highly visible school buildings in the center of town. Until St. Julie Billiart completed its building project in late 1981 there was the ever-present difficulty of parishioners and guests locating its temporary quarters. The school issue is still present twenty-five years later. Many families who move into the city routinely joined the bigger parish because it has a school.

As difficult as it was then and still is now, to some degree, to observe many solid Catholic families who live in the parish boundaries transferring to the mother parish, there is a more significant situation that is both frustrating and challenging. Since the 1980's the high mobility of the American people coupled with a more liberal attitude toward morality and church laws has resulted in the phenomenon that I call the "cafeteria Catholic." Simply speaking, it means that many Catholic adults, who have had minimal religious education in their youth, pick and choose their religious beliefs and moral directives as well as the parish that suits their specific needs and wants. It has been my observation as pastor for almost twenty-five years that the majority of the adults who have registered here have

made some significant decisions and choices before joining. Currently one half of the active families in this parish live outside the parish boundaries. They come from the surrounding cities in Lorain and Cuyahoga counties. Their age ranges from twenty-two to forty-five. The majority have been inactive Catholics for several years. Many of them have been shopping around for a church community for a year or two before registering. This poses significant pastoral concerns for me as I interview them and gently try to initiate them into parish life and ministry. In the early years of the parish the challenge of sustaining parishioners' membership resulted in some new pastoral approaches. It was found, for example, that simple bulletin announcements did not convey messages to the parishioners who infrequently attend Mass. The best approach is the personal visitation and a direct and honest discussion on the issues that are troubling and alienating the adult Catholic. More involvement of dedicated and trained lay volunteers to visit the homes of the newly registered parishioners promotes hospitality and friendship among the parishioners.

In the years that I have welcomed new families to the parish, I have noticed several variables that seem to be consistent throughout the initial interview process. Many of the couples have been shopping for a parish in which they feel welcomed and accepted. Many couples who have been previously married do not feel any need to validate their marriage. Finally, the young couples with children invariably have one or two children who need to be baptized or prepared for their First Holy Communion. The level of faith and education seems to be very low in spite of the fact that the men and women strongly acknowledge their Catholic background. This is the author's personal evaluation gathered from listening and reflecting on his 25 years experience as pastor.

These facts coupled with my interest to determine what pattern was emerging from the interviews with new parishioners have led me to this project. I intend to develop an instrument to survey the attitudes and concerns of newly registered parishioners. To develop this survey I conducted at least two focus groups to surface some basic questions for the survey. After the survey was completed I interviewed four to six individuals to enrich the responses from the survey. I also used the same interview approach to provide some descriptive data when I interviewed the pastors of the three surrounding parishes. The four parishes of St. Mary and Holy Trinity of Avon, and St. Peter and St. Julie Billiart of North Ridgeville, form a four-point quadrant of territory approximately twenty-five square miles. This geographical factor should provide some consistent data about new membership in each parish.

In this project, writing from the perspective of a pastor of a medium size suburban parish, I hope to bring to the ministerial context some basic information about the returning inactive Catholic. It is the ultimate dream of every pastor that all returning inactive Catholic parishioners would attend Mass regularly and be very active in the parish. Every pastor would want to have all active parishioners aware and alert to the needs of the newly registered. Most of all, every pastor would desire to meet personally each returning inactive Catholic in order to listen to his or her story of faith lost and faith renewed. Realistically, in the increasingly busy world of the active pastor, there isn't the time or the energy available to accomplish all these worthy objectives. By this study and the research that it involves I believe that I can identify some trends or reasons that are motivating the returning inactive Catholic. Granted all the specific needs of the returning inactive Catholic cannot be handled immediately, there are some needs that can be

addressed directly, if the pastoral staff has some basic information and practical pastoral skills. This would include good listening skills and a solid understanding of the theological concepts of church and parish.

The pastoral setting for this project is the average American Catholic suburban parish of the twenty-first century. Since most of the parishes in the suburbs do have parochial schools there will be some special information about parishioners from parishes without schools that transfer to the school parish. However the basic data retrieved from the surveys and the interviews will apply equally to parishes with or without schools.

The persons that have been interviewed in this study are the inactive Catholics who are returning to active membership in the local parish.. They are young couples between the ages of twenty and forty-five, usually with two children, and are seeking a small welcoming faith community. Their concepts of church and parish are not in tune with the Vatican II Council documents and later teachings. Many of them do admit they were poorly educated in the basic teachings of the Catholic faith. They profess faith in the Catholic Church but it is a faith that has been poorly developed in their adolescent years. They are searchers and seekers who come to be nourished in the parish of their choice.

This project contributes to the ministerial field some benchmarks to identify the returning inactive Catholic. It will provide support and affirmation to the busy pastoral team in their efforts to reach out and welcome the inactive Catholic. It will give them a solid background of the teachings of Vatican II about the concepts of Church and parish. It will be a good survey of the reasons why inactive Catholics are returning and what they expect from the parish. This project is not attempting by any means to be the definitive answer to the very serious concerns that conscientious pastors have for their parishioners.



It can provide some direction, renewed hope, and a sense of personal achievement and satisfaction in the knowledge that their ministry is being enriched and nourished by this study. There is also the hoped for result that this study will affirm the busy pastors that their current pastoral efforts are effective and that they can indeed improve their pastoral skills. All pastors naturally want to update their pastoral and theological approach in the daily ministry to the alienated and returning inactive Catholic. It is the ultimate goal of this project that the pastor and the pastoral team in today's modern parish can find affirmation, support, and information in welcoming the inactive Catholic back to a welcoming faith community.

I have received many insights into the faith journeys that the returning inactive Catholics have traveled. What caused them to leave the church? What did they find in other spiritual values? And, most importantly, what is causing them to return? The reason behind choosing one church over another also needs to be explored. Sometimes the same new parishioners who picked your parish and then were very active for a year or two will gradually start pulling away and eventually will leave for another church. This is a troubling situation for the pastor who has tried to be very welcoming and affirming to these people. I have been reflecting about this situation for many years and feel very strongly that grace and free will play an important part in the personal choices that people make in their faith journeys. The parish is not the only instrument or means to guide the searching and questioning inactive Catholic. It seems that many people try to find community in other groups that are not Catholic or even Christian. Sometimes they return to the Faith. Others do not return for as many reason as there are individuals. The pastor cannot personally take this responsibility for those men and women who come and go

from one community to another. All he can and must do is to be faithful to the Gospel imperatives to seek the lost, to welcome the stranger, and to embrace all with true love. How others respond to his pastoral care is embraced by the mystery of grace and free will. I hope to strengthen my efforts to welcome and support the inactive returning Catholic. From the research, study, and reflections undertaken in this project I will deepen my theological insights about church and parish. Because of this project, I will have the personal satisfaction, as well, of persevering in a three-year study program that has not only enhanced my pastoral skills but also greatly updated and increased my theological understanding.

What specific outcomes do I, as a minister, anticipate for the success of the project? I am looking for a good response from the individuals who have been invited to participate in the initial focus groups. I need at least sixty responses from the one hundred and twenty parishioners who have been asked to fill out the survey on church attitudes. These surveys coupled with the individual interviews of the three neighboring pastors will provide sufficient data to develop adequate statistical profiles. From the data that will be processed by the SPSS statistical program, I will be able to chart on many analytical levels the variables that identify the needs and attitudes of the returning inactive Catholic. I also anticipate an enrichment of the basic information already gained from the surveys and focus groups. I believe that my ministry will be strengthened in the knowledge that, from this project, I can identify more clearly the needs of the returning inactive Catholic parishioner. With a better understanding of what motivates their return I can be more sympathetic, compassionate, and facilitating towards them. Instead of being critical of their time away from the parish, I will concentrate on the joy of welcoming them back to

their spiritual home. Many times the pastor feels he is in the awkward role of judge and jury when interviewing the returning inactive Catholic. This adversarial role can be eliminated when he realizes that he is dealing with one of the lost sheep that Christ mentioned in the Gospels. He must leave the other ninety-nine behind who are safely embraced in the parish and do everything in his power to reach out to the one that needs his pastoral care and support. All the work, study, research, and writing will bear fruition when the pastor reflects on this project, adapts the data to his particular pastoral setting, and prayerfully welcomes back the returning inactive Catholic.

All depends on the interaction of grace and free will. The pastor knows that he is only an instrument in the hands of the Supreme Pastor of souls. The awesome responsibility that he has as a pastor cannot be accepted and exercised without a deep spiritual life. His ministry to the people entrusted to his care needs constant nourishment from prayer and the sacraments. However, as grace builds upon nature, he must be conscious of the need to grow in his pastoral and theological skills. This study will provide some insights and support in his efforts to meet the ever-increasing challenges of the Catholic Parish in the twenty-first century.

## Chapter One

### Vatican II Council and the Church

Since the conclusion of the second Vatican Council in 1965, the Catholic Church worldwide has undergone radical changes. Perhaps the greatest effect of the reforms of the Council have been experienced in the Catholic church of the United States. Historically the changes came in a period of American history and culture that saw the assassinations of a president and the head of the civil rights reform, the turmoil of the Vietnamese war and the beginnings of an era of unparalleled prosperity and religious and intellectual freedom. This heady combination of sorrow, pain and prosperity as well as rejection of previously held moral and intellectual convictions led many to reject the authority and moral discipline of both state and church authority. For many Catholics the changes in the Church since Vatican II left them confused and, at times, angry. The introduction of many liturgical rituals such as the vernacular at Mass, removal of altar railings and the more frequent use of lay ministers at Mass appeared to many to be removing the solid foundations of their faith. The Church's stand on birth control and abortion was also seen as restricting one's personal freedom of choice. The strong emphasis on personal freedom of conscience and responsibility made rejection of difficult and limiting church laws an easy choice. The failure of government to resolve the Vietnam conflict, for instance, and the scandal of the Watergate conspiracy led to a crisis of authority and authenticity in government. The sixties and seventies in the United States were years of discontent, disillusionment with authority, and rejection of commonly held principles of morality and public trust.

In the midst of this growing unrest and confusion about values and authority, the degrees and constitutions of the council gave direction and hope for the future. Perhaps the biggest change that occurred was in the teachings about the nature of the Church and the interaction of its membership. Two documents, in particular, were outstanding in their content and direction. These are the Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (**Lumen Gentium**) and the Constitution on the Church in the Modern World (**Gaudium et Spes**). These two documents along with the Constitution on the Liturgy (**Sacrosanctum Concilium**) and the decree on the Apostolate of the Laity (**Apostolicam Actuositatem**) set the tone for the new understanding of the Church and its influence in the modern world.

Pope Paul VI in his opening allocution at the second session of the Council (Sept. 29, 1963) said that the Church is a mystery. "It is a reality infused with the hidden presence of God. It lies, therefore, within the very nature of the Church to be always open to new and greater explanation."<sup>1</sup>

With this as his premise and opening challenge to view the church with the new lenses of wonder and openness to the Spirit, the Pope and the bishops gave the world a new theology of Church. The nature of this theology and how it may be understood by the average American Catholic is the subject of this chapter.

### **Part 1 Lumen Gentium and the Images of the Church**

The opening paragraph of the Council documents stated that the church is a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all humankind.<sup>2</sup> With broad strokes the council painted a picture of the church as expressing the mission of the

Christ to a world that is joined together more closely than ever before by social, technical and cultural bonds.

For Roman Catholic theologians the concept of church as sacrament was not an entirely new concept. However it did challenge the reflective layman and laywoman to apply that concept to their notions of church. The Church is now seen as a means of recognizing Christ not just in the pews but in the workplace of every day life. The Church is not a sacrament in the sense that the traditional seven sacraments of the Catholic faith are understood and received by the faithful. The causal effects of the seven sacraments can and do work independently of the recipient's interpretation and rationality. For example, infant baptism does not depend upon the volition and understanding of the recipient. To speak of the church as a sacrament is to use symbolic language that directs the interpreter to look at the concept of sign and its object in a different manner than hitherto experienced in Catholic theology. In his book, *The Truth of Broken Symbols*, Robert Cummings Neville writes about the interpretation of religious symbols as broken symbols, that is to say, signs that before were clearly identified as having a meaning but now can have different interpretations. A very common example is the wearing of religious symbols as costume jewelry. Neville's thesis is that every religious symbol or sign can be interpreted by an individual according to his or her own set of references. "Religious symbols are among the means by which we engage the divine."<sup>3</sup> To engage the divine in religious symbols is to recognize the grace and power of Christ working through the Sacraments and teachings of the Church. The challenge for the theologian today is to convey a

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<sup>1</sup> *Documents of Vatican II*, Walter J. Abbott, S.J. editor. N.Y. America Press: 1966. Page 15.

<sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, Page 15.

practical meaning of the Church as Sacrament or sign of the risen Christ to a world that, according to many observers, does not interpret religious symbols as meaningful in day to day living. We interpret signs to stand for or represent an object in a certain respect. Religious symbols, such as cross, statue, genuflection, are coded naturally to link with the divine. However one can interpret differently a religious symbol if it does not engage his or her imagination to connect with the theological truth that is the object or referent of the symbol.<sup>4</sup>

To the credit of the Council Fathers the symbols they used flow naturally from the common experience of man and woman and appear to eliminate a lot of technical and theological concepts that have served at times in the past to blur the role of the laity and the clergy.

In the **Constitution on the Church**, paragraph five states: "The mystery of the holy church is manifest in her very foundation, for the Lord Jesus inaugurated her by preaching the good news, that is, the coming of God's Kingdom."<sup>5</sup> The kingdom promised for centuries in the Hebrew Scriptures is realized in the coming of Christ by his preaching, miracles, and sacrifice on the Cross. This kingdom clearly visible in the very person of Christ, the Son of God, is entrusted to the Church established by Christ upon the foundation of the Apostles. The assembly of believers were commissioned by Christ after the Resurrection to proclaim the good news, to baptize, and to teach in His name. Just as in the Old Testament the revelation of the Kingdom was described in symbols so in the

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<sup>3</sup> *The Truth of Broken Symbols*. Robert C. Neville. Albany, N.Y.: State University of New York Press. 1996. Pg.268.

<sup>4</sup> Robert C. Neville in his book *The Book of Broken Symbols* addressing this problem of truth in religious symbols in chapter seven... Truth in Religious Symbols.

<sup>5</sup> *Documents of Vatican II*. Constitution on the Church. Par. 5.

same way the inner nature of the Church is made known through various images. The council uses images drawn from pastoral life, agriculture, building construction, and from family and married life to describe the Church today. These scripture based images found in the first chapter of the **Constitution on Church** are documented in the sixth paragraph.

“Thus, the Church is a sheepfold whose one and necessary door is Christ (Jn. 10:1-10). She is a flock of which God Himself foretold that He would be the Shepherd... The Church is a tract of land to be cultivated, the field of God... The Church has more often been called the edifice of God. On this foundation the Church is built by the Apostles. (cf. I Cor. 3:11.) and from it the Church receives duration and solidity. This edifice is adorned by various names: the house of God, the household of God in the Spirit, the dwelling place of God among men, (sic) and the holy temple.”<sup>6</sup>

These descriptions of the Church differ, obviously, from the traditional notion of the Church as a hierarchical institution with very distinct orders of authority and chain of command. From the time of Christ's installation of Peter as the visible head of the church, with the authority to loose and to bind, the nature of the Church was seen as very hierarchical.<sup>7</sup> The first Council of the Church in Jerusalem acknowledged the authority of Peter in settling a theological dispute. In the first three centuries of the Catholic Church's existence the persecutions only intensified the role of the bishop of Rome as a spiritual leader and a symbol of faith. After the edict of Constantine in 313 A.D., the expansion of the Church continued through Europe and Africa. The role of the lay person decreased as the authority and power of the cleric increased largely due to higher education and social status in the community. Although second to the leadership of the Pope and bishops, the role of the laity was important for its support financially and spiritually. From the ranks of the laity came great spiritual leaders in the church during the difficult centuries following

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<sup>6</sup> Ibid., Par. 6.

<sup>7</sup> Matt. 16:18.



the collapse of the Holy Roman Empire. The Renaissance Period, especially in Italy, from the fourteenth to sixteenth centuries saw the emergence of great artists and popes such as Michelangelo, Raphael, Giotto, Bernini, Sixtus V, Julius II, Clement VII, Pius V, Innocent III, and Boniface VIII. Throughout the history of the Church from the time of Christ until the convocation of the Second Vatican Council in 1959 the roles of the clerics and the laity were clearly defined and recognized. The lay person had little or no say in the inner workings of the church's administration. Basically all authority and decisions regarding the role of the laity was determined by the hierarchy. Vatican II radically changed this concept of hierarchical dominance. The council fathers certainly guided by the Holy Spirit in their deliberations surprised themselves and the world by introducing the concept of the Church as the People of God.

Chapter two of **Constitution on the Church** describes the Church as the new people of God. This title puts emphasis on the human and communal side of the Church rather than on the institutional and hierarchical aspects. It refers to the total community of the Church, the laity as well as the clergy. Paragraph Fourteen of the document is worth quoting in its entirety:

"They (the people of God) are fully incorporated in the society of the Church who, possessing the spirit of Christ, accept her entire system and all the means of salvation given to her, and through union with her visible structure are joined to Christ, who rules through the Supreme Pontiff and the bishops. This joining is effected by the bonds of professed faith, of the sacraments, and of ecclesiastical government, and of communion."<sup>8</sup>

What was especially noteworthy was the distinction made between the ministerial priesthood of the ordained and the common priesthood of the faithful. Although they

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<sup>8</sup> *Documents of Vatican II*, Lumen Gentium, Par. 14.

differ from one another in essence and not only in degree they are still interrelated since each of them in its own special way is a participation of the one priesthood of Christ. Through baptism we all share in the priestly, prophetic and kingly powers of Christ. Through our incorporation into the Body of Christ we Christians have dignity, power, and responsibility to build up the Kingdom of Christ. That kingdom is here in our midst, but not fully realized until the last days. St. Paul in his pastoral letters, especially to the Corinthians, stressed the concept of the kingdom as present but not yet completed.<sup>9</sup>

**Lumen Gentium** clearly states again in the tenth paragraph of the second chapter that Christ the High Priest has made this new people a kingdom of priests to God, His Father. The baptized, by regeneration and the anointing of the Holy Spirit, are consecrated to be a spiritual house and a holy priesthood.<sup>10</sup> The ordained priest in the name of the people of God consecrates the sacred elements at the Mass but all the baptized and priestly people offer this sacrifice to the Father in union with Jesus through the person of the presider. This renewed emphasis on the priestly powers of the laity has not only deepened the understanding of the Mass but it has encouraged the laity to be more responsible and active in the participation of the Eucharist.

The prophetic office of the people of God means that the laity are to be a living witness of the presence of God in the world. They are to deepen their faith, charity and understanding of the church's teaching. The council reasserted the concept that the body of the faithful, as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One, (cf. Jn. 2:20,27) cannot

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<sup>9</sup> Marion Soards in his book, *The Apostle Paul*, Mahwah, N.J.; Paulist Press. 1987 discusses this aspect of Pauline eschatology as well as the pastoral impact of the seven disputed letters.

<sup>10</sup> **Lumen Gentium**, Par. 10

err in matters of belief.<sup>11</sup> This is the concept of *sensus fidelium*, literally, “the sense of the faithful.” It is one of the norms of theological truth, namely, the actual belief of Christians down through the ages. This sense of faith possessed by Christians is not a mere passive receptivity to the teachings of the Church. It enjoys an active role in the transmission and unfolding of the Christian message, though always in dependence on the authoritative judgments of the teaching authority of the Church. Charles David in his book, *Theology for Today*, wrote that there are three conditions that are necessary to ensure the dogmatic efficacy of the insight of the faithful. “It must have an objective basis in revealed truth; it must concern a point within the grasp of the faithful generally; and it must be universal in character.”<sup>12</sup> For example, Pope Pius XII invoked this principle when he solemnly declared in August 1950 that Mary the Mother of God was assumed body and soul at the end of her life into heaven. He mentioned that it was a common belief among Christians that Mary was assumed into heaven. This was a classic use of the theological concept of *sensus fidelium*.

Avery Dulles spoke about the sense of the Church and the sense of the Faithful at the annual Mullen Lecture at St. Mary Seminary, Cleveland, Ohio, on April 20, 1997. In that lecture he traced the history of this theological concept to the time of Cardinal Newman and the Second Vatican Council. Newman’s views on the sense of the faithful were to some extent officially endorsed by the teaching of the Second Vatican Council. “Like Newman, Vatican II insists that the faithful are not merely passive in submitting to the teaching of the hierarchy; but that, having received the Holy Spirit in baptism, they

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<sup>11</sup> Ibid. Par. 12.

<sup>12</sup> Davis, Charles. *Theology for Today*. Pg. 2

have a certain connaturality with the truths of faith.”<sup>13</sup> The following text from the 12<sup>th</sup> paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* expresses the thinking of the council fathers on this subject:

The body of faithful as a whole, anointed as they are by the Holy One cannot err in matters of belief. Thanks to a supernatural sense of the faith, which characterizes the People as a whole, it manifests this unerring quality when, “from the bishops down to the last member of the laity,” it shows universal agreement in matter of faith and morals.

For, by this sense of faith, which is aroused and sustained by the Spirit of truth, God’s People accepts not the word of men but the very Word of God. It clings without fail to the faith once delivered to the saints, penetrates more deeply by accurate insights, and applies it more thoroughly to life. (*Lumen Gentium*. Paragraph 12.)

Avery Dulles continued in his lecture to summarize the main points of the doctrine and defines the faithful, how they are consulted, their sense or consensus, and their sphere of competence. He quoted John Paul II and Cardinal Ratzinger on pages nineteen and twenty of his lecture...

“John Paul II in his apostolic exhortation on the family cautions that the supernatural sense of the faith is not always the same as majority opinion and that public opinion polls are not to be considered reliable indexes of the sense of the Faith. The Congregation for the Doctrine of the Faith in its 1990 instruction on the Ecclesial Vocation of the Theologian likewise warns against the misunderstandings of the “supernatural sense of the faith” that are current in democratic cultures today. The prevailing opinion among Catholics, says Cardinal Ratzinger, cannot automatically be identified with the sense of the faith. ... In many instances the truth may be upheld by a prophetic minority in the Church rather than by the community at large. The saints and martyrs, who are prepared to make sacrifices for the faith, are the preeminent witnesses.”

An excellent explanation of *sensus fidelium* can be found in *Teaching with Authority. A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church* by Richard Gaillardetz. In his comments on the 12<sup>th</sup> paragraph of *Lumen Gentium* Gaillardetz says that each believer,

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<sup>13</sup> *Mullen Lecture on Sense of the Church and the Faithful*. Avery Dulles. Unpublished Paper. Pg. 7.

by virtue of baptism, has a supernatural instinct or sense of the faith that allows each to recognize divine revelation and to respond to it in faith. It is a corporate belief, not an individual exercise and it refers to all members of the church both lay and clergy. The treatment of this subject begins on page 230 of his book and it is worth reading in light of the reference to this theological concept in the Council Documents.<sup>14</sup>

The Catechism of the Catholic Church, in commenting on the royal or kingly function of the laity, states “the people of God fulfills its royal dignity by a life in keeping with its vocation to serve with Christ.”<sup>15</sup> As Christ came to serve, not to be served, so the follower of Christ today serves the needs of the poor and suffering. They are the ones in whom the Church recognizes the image of her poor and suffering founder.<sup>16</sup>

The role of the priest in serving the People of God is defined in the 28<sup>th</sup> paragraph of **Lumen Gentium**. Significant is the careful alignment with the bishops in sharing the responsibility of preaching the gospel, shepherding the faithful, and celebrating divine worship. They are called prudent cooperators with the episcopal order in service to the People of God.<sup>17</sup> The bishop is to regard his priests, who are his co-workers, as sons and friends, just as Christ called His disciples no longer servants but friends. (cf. Jn. 15: 15) The priests are called fathers in Christ and are to take care of the faithful whom they have spiritually begotten by baptism and by their preaching. They are to lead and serve the local community, i.e. parish, that it may worthily be called by that name by which the one and

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<sup>14</sup> *Teaching with Authority. A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church.* Gaillardetz, Richard. Collegeville, Min.: Liturgical Press. 1977.

<sup>15</sup> *Catechism of the Catholic Church.* N.Y. Doubleday: 1994. Page 226. Par. 786

<sup>16</sup> *Lumen Gentium.* Par. 8.

<sup>17</sup> *Ibid.* Par. 28

entire People is distinguished, namely, the Church of God.<sup>18</sup> The council then turns its attention to the definition and function of the laity as members of the Church. It stresses that everything that has been written previously in the document concerning the people of God applies equally to the laity, religious, and clergy.

Chapter Four of **Lumen Gentium** defines the term laity as “all the faithful except those in holy orders and those in a religious state sanctioned by the Church. These faithful are by baptism made one body with Christ and are established among the People of God. They are in their own way made sharers in the priestly, prophetic, and kingly functions of Christ.”<sup>19</sup> The lay person is called to live in the secular world and work for the sanctification of that world from within. In cooperation with their pastors they are called to let the power of the gospel shine forth in their daily social and family life. The fourth chapter is filled with statements affirming the role of the laity in the world to witness the teachings of the Church by promoting culture and human activity with moral values. The entire church is called to holiness. It is expressed by striving for the perfection of charity under the influence of the Holy Spirit. The mandate for holiness is clearly expressed in paragraph forty: “The Lord Jesus preached holiness of life to each and every one of His disciples, regardless of their situation: You therefore are to be perfect, even as your heavenly Father is perfect” (Mt. 5:48).<sup>20</sup> This call to holiness for all the members of the Church is a challenge for the modern man and woman who live in a culture that is materialistic and hedonistic. With the clarification of the nature and role of the Church in society there is hope that all the people of God will support and encourage each other to

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<sup>18</sup> Ibid. Par. 28.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid. Par. 31.

<sup>20</sup> Ibid. Par. 40.

accept the common responsibility of sharing the Good News. The nature of the Church as explained in the **Constitution of the Church** is understood as a community of believers united in Baptism, sharing the responsibilities and privileges of a priestly, prophetic and kingly people. They are united in faith to the apostolic teachings of the Church and are called to be mutually supportive and cooperative in all the official activities of the Church. Liturgy, social justice, works of charity, education, and especially the quest for peace and justice worldwide are areas to be embraced.

## **Part 2 Church in the Modern World**

The pastoral constitution on the **Church in the Modern World** (**Gaudium et Spes**) is a very important achievement of the essentially pastoral Council. It provides a synthesis of papal statements on social issues from Pope Leo XIII to Paul VI. The tone of the document is set in a context of the Church being in service to the world. Paragraph forty states: “The Church, at once a visible assembly and a spiritual community, goes forward together with humanity and experiences the same earthly lot which the world does. She serves as a leaven and as a kind of soul for human society as it is to be renewed in Christ and transformed into God’s family.”<sup>21</sup> The pilgrim nature of the Church and the concept that all people of God participate in this journey in life towards eternity are very much part of the council’s teachings.

The first part of **Gaudium et Spes** discusses the dignity of the human person, the community of humankind, man and woman’s activity throughout the world, the role of the church in the modern world. The second section is directed towards the special needs of

society in the light of the gospel and of human experience. Marriage and family life, the proper development of culture, the political community, socio-economic life, and the fostering of peace and the promotion of a community of nations are carefully discussed and analyzed according to gospel values and the social teachings of the Church. These two documents of the II Vatican Council, namely, **Constitution on the Church**, and the **Church in the Modern World** form the theological basis for the definition of the nature of the Church and its role in society. From a very authoritarian and highly structured clerical organization the nature of the church has been transformed into a more gentle model of a faith community. It has the necessary structures and precepts of a human institution but its intent is to be pastoral and supportive in all its activities. It intends to use the talents and charisms of both laity and clergy in a cooperative manner instead of adversarial attitudes of previous generations. The Church is a spiritual institution founded by Christ and committed to the salvation of all peoples. The administration of the sacraments as well as the preservation of the teachings and regulations pertaining to the good order of the church are the primary responsibility of the hierarchy in union with the supreme Pontiff. These functions are, in the mind of the Vatican Council documents, to be assumed with awe, humility, and always with respect to the dignity and freedom of every individual.

When the Vatican Council concluded its sessions in December 1965, the work of facilitating the reforms began in earnest. The nature of the Church, previously perceived as a very highly organized clerical institution with very rigid regulations for the role of the laity, was now seen in different perspective. The shared responsibility of clergy and laity as

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<sup>21</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*. Par. 40.



the People of God working together to make the Kingdom more visible and viable in the modern world was a giant step forward in the “aggiornamento” process envisioned by Pope John XXIII. The updating and renewing of the Church to a shape consistent with the spirit of Christ was meant to be a challenge to the entire world.

How the theologians and the pastors understood and put in practice the new theology of the nature of the Church depended upon their thinking about the nature and role of the parish. For it is at the level of the parish that universal Church is experienced in the celebration of sacraments and spiritual growth.<sup>22</sup>

### **Part 3 Models of the Church**

#### **A. Models of the Church by Avery Dulles**

Avery Dulles, S.J., in 1974 published *Models of the Church*. His use of models in his ecclesiology was a significant step forward in understanding the nature of the Church that was emerging from the study of the Vatican II council documents. His descriptions of these models have been helpful to the pastors of the Church in their efforts to be faithful pastoral ministers of the Gospel. Sabbas Killian, O.F.M., in 1977 published his reflections on theological models for the parish. The writings of Killian and Dulles will be the subject of the third part of this chapter.

There will be reflections on the nature of parish as described in canon law, the documents of Vatican II, and commentaries by Coriden, Castelli and Gremillion. These three theologians give insights into the nature of the emerging Church after Vatican II and offer a view of the contemporary Catholic parish.

In his book, *Models of the Church*, Avery Dulles offered a paradigm shift in viewing the nature of the church. He looks at the nature of the church in the context of images that deepen one's theoretical understanding of that reality. This new way of looking at reality can be successful in solving a great variety of problems and is expected to be an appropriate tool for unraveling anomalies as yet unsolved.<sup>23</sup> When the council called the church a mystery it was understood that the Church is not fully intelligible to the finite human mind, and that the reason for this lack of understanding is not the poverty but the richness of the Church itself. In Christ are "unsearchable riches" (Ephesians 3:9) and in Him dwells the whole fullness of God (Ephesians 3:19). It is by exploring the many dimensions of the Church's life and membership that the richness of the Church's nature is gradually understood and appreciated.

History attests to the reality that there have been many Christian communities known as churches, not all of them equally faithful to Christ and His Spirit. In the course of two thousand years of Christianity many church communities have arisen to challenge the faith and consciences of its followers. The Roman Catholic Church believes that the theological concept of church refers to the mystery of Christ as realized in the community of those who believe in Him and are assembled in His name. It is by sharing the Sacraments and the Word of God in the Scriptures in union with the spiritual leadership of the Bishop of Rome that the Church is identified and embraced. Theologically the Church is more than the visible elements; it is the mystery of Grace, received and accepted in faith. The Second Vatican Council called the Church a mystery. The unfolding of the many

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<sup>22</sup> This hypothesis is described at length in Sabbas Kilian's book... *Theological Models of the Parish*. N.Y.: Alba House. 1997

<sup>23</sup> Confer *Models of the Church*. Avery Dulles, Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday. 1974. Page 24.

facets of Christ's power and presence in this world is experienced in the faith and lives of those who accept membership in this Church through baptism. This experience takes place in the local church or parish community that is the primary instrument to proclaim the presence of God's kingdom on earth. A brief survey of the models of the church by Dulles and Killian will be valuable to develop a theology of church and parish that can assist the returning inactive Catholic to a solid understanding of these concepts.

Most Catholics raised in the faith before the Second Vatican Council remember the statement by Pope Pius XII in 1943 that the Church is defined as the mystical body of Christ. The analogy of the body of Christ to the body of the church was a very popular notion in those years before the Vatican Council. Although the Council did use the image of the Body of Christ as a model the dominant model that emerged was the People of God. This was a paradigm shift from the image of Christ as a model to the network of interpersonal relationships, that is, the Church as community. Other images of the Church surfaced after Vatican II to describe its nature and approach to the problems of modern society. Avery Dulles offers five models of the Church for reflection and further understanding of the Church's role in the world today. Dulles clearly states in the first chapter of his book:

"Each model of the Church has its weaknesses; no one should be canonized as the measure of all the rest. Instead of searching for some absolutely best image, it would be advisable to recognize that the manifold images given by us by Scripture and Tradition are mutually complementary. They should be made to interpenetrate and mutually qualify one another."<sup>24</sup>

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<sup>24</sup> Ibid. Page 29.

1. Dulles lists five models for the Church. The first is the **institutional** model that divides the powers and functions of the church as teaching, sanctifying and governing. In each case this is identifying the Church itself with the governing body or hierarchy. Robert C. Dixon and Dean R. Hoge in an article in the *Review of Religious Research* comment: "The institutional model stresses its hierarchical authority derived from St. Peter, its role of teaching and governing the laity. It clearly sees the higher clergy and the Pope as the source of all power and initiative".<sup>25</sup> While this model has some strong backing in church documents in the past two centuries according to Dulles and does give its members a strong sense of corporate identity it does have some serious flaws. Dulles states in his second chapter that this model leads to a passive attitude among the laity. It does not have a strong foundation in Scripture and Tradition. This ecclesiology does not fit in with the spirit of the times. Church dialogue, ecumenical sharing, and the proliferation of interest in world religions do not favor a concept of a church that is primarily institutional and hierarchical. To the modern person a hierarchical church projects a concept of authority that is clerical, juridical, and triumphant. There can be little attraction to such a Church that holds on to such trappings of past glory and history. Fortunately these images are not being advanced by the majority of our Church leaders today. The Church does not derive all its reality and strength from its institutional features. Dulles writes: "The institutional elements in the Church must ultimately be justified by their capacity to express or strengthen the Church as a community of life, witness, and service, a community that reconciles and unites men (sic) in the grace of Christ."<sup>26</sup> The cohesiveness of the Church's

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<sup>25</sup> Dixon, Robert C. & Dean R. Hoge. *Review of Religious Research*. Spring 1979. Pages 150-167.

<sup>26</sup> Dulles, Avery. *Models of the Church*. Doubleday & Com., Inc. Garden City, New York: 1974. Page 42.

teaching on morality, doctrine, and worship are certainly positive attributes of the institutional church. These are factors that are to be valued and accepted in any model of the Church. A brief survey of the remaining four models will support this statement.

2. The **mystical communion** model stresses strong community relationships. The Church is a fellowship of persons who have relationships with God and with one another in Christ. Instead of stressing law, dogma and authority, it sees the Church as the mystical Body of Christ. It is a close knit community with both internal and external ties, and it is committed to rich personal relationships through which individuals can find communion with God. Dulles in his third chapter of *Models of the Church* gives a historical background to the concepts of communion. He mentions Yves Congar and Jerome Hammer in their development of the internal and external categories of community. "The Church (Hammer states) is the mystical body of Christ, a communion which is both inward and outward, an inner communion of spiritual life ( faith, hope, and charity) signified and engendered by an external communion in profession of the faith, discipline, and the sacramental life."<sup>27</sup> This concept of the Church as a communion flows from biblical images and especially in the images of Church as the Body of Christ and the People of God. The idea of church as the Body of Christ is found in Paul's letters to the Romans, Chapter 12, and his first letter to the Corinthians, Chapter 12. The main point in these chapters is the mutual union and interdependence of the local communities upon one another. Later development, especially by St. Augustine, stressed the image of the body of Christ and the mystical and invisible communion that binds together those who live by the grace of Christ. In 1943 Pope Pius XII defined the Church of Jesus Christ as the Mystical Body of

Christ and stated it is identical with the Roman Catholic Church. Some twenty years later Vatican II in **Lumen Gentium** states that the Church is the Body of Christ but distinguishes between the church as a hierarchical society and as Body of Christ. It said that the two elements are related to each other in a way comparable to the human and divine natures of Christ. The structure of the Church is described as an instrument serving Christ's Spirit, who vivifies it in building up his Body. **Lumen Gentium** does not assert that the Church of Christ or the Mystical Body is coterminous with the Roman Catholic Church. The two concepts of the Body of Christ and the People of God in describing the Church as a Mystical Communion, according to Dulles, both illuminate from different angles the notion of Church as communion or community. "The Church, from this point of view, is not in the first instance an institution or a visibly organized society. Rather, it is a communion of men(sic), primarily interior but also expressed by external bonds of creed, worship, and ecclesiastical fellowship."<sup>28</sup> The weaknesses of this model does obscure the relationships between the spiritual and visible dimensions of the Church. It tends to exalt and divinize the Church, thereby making it difficult to enter into dialogue with other ecclesial communities. It fails to give the baptized member a clear sense of identity or mission. The balance to this is its ability to relate to the Holy Spirit and to be of mutual service to its membership. One of its natural appeals is the desire of the returning inactive Catholic to find a strong faith community centered on life in the Spirit. This will be mentioned later in this project when the results of a survey on church attitudes and concerns are presented.

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<sup>27</sup> Ibid. page 45.

<sup>28</sup> Ibid. page 51.

3. The Dogmatic Constitution on the Church (**Lumen Gentium**) stated that the Church by her relationship with Christ, is a kind of sacrament of intimate union with God, and of the unity of all mankind(sic), that is, she is a sign and an instrument of such union and unity.<sup>29</sup> This was not a new concept since theologians such as Schillebeeckx, Smulders, Congar, and Martelet had been writing for years about this concept. The Council states without a full explanation that there is a connection between the Church as a primordial sacrament and the seven ritual sacraments that express the sacramentality of the Church as a whole. The nature of a sacrament as a sign that points out a reality beyond its immediate form or symbol is defined by the Council of Trent as the visible form of an invisible reality. The sacraments as events are expressed in the coming together of a community of believers in contact with the Divine. Jesus as the visible sign of a loving Father communicates Himself to humankind in the founding of the Church as an instrument of salvation. It is in the concept of the Church expressing God's will for us to be nourished and guided to the heavenly kingdom that the notion of Sacrament is expressed. Clearly the people of God in prayer, worship and other religious forms, such as art, do experience the presence and power of Christ in the Church. Through these actions the Church signifies what it contains and contains what it signifies (definition of a sacrament). The Church becomes an event, a visible sacrament of Christ's invisible grace. Christians who confess Jesus as the supreme symbol of salvation see Him as the primordial sacrament... the supreme efficacious symbol. The Church is the place where God's love is communicated most fully in Christ. This visible Church then can be understood as a sacred sign or sacrament to all who are disposed to receive and accept Christ as Lord and Savior.

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<sup>29</sup> *Lumen Gentium* par. 1.

The Church as sacrament draws upon the institutional model and appeals to those who are in contact with a believing and loving Church. However there are many persons for whom the sign value of the Church will appear differently because they can interpret the symbol without reference to any religious meaning. For instance, the notion of the seven ritual sacraments of the Catholic Church will have no meaning to a Buddhist or Muslim follower who lives in a non-Christian environment. In spite of this limitation the concept of Church as sacrament does appeal to Catholics who have a practical experience of living the sacraments.

4. The Church as Herald focuses on the word instead of the sacrament. It presents the Church as gathered and formed by the word of God. The mission of the Church is to proclaim that which it has heard, believed, and been commissioned to proclaim. The Church is a herald, a messenger of Good News. The church has no particular form, but it exists wherever the word is preached and believed. This model has a strong evangelistic approach. It can be understood as a congregation with local authority, based on Jesus' words that "where two or three are gathered in my name, there I am in their midst" (Mt. 18:20). This ecclesiology according to Dulles is radically centered upon Jesus Christ and on the bible as the primary witness to him.<sup>30</sup> The strengths of this model are many. It has a good biblical foundation in the prophetic tradition of the Hebrew Scriptures and St. Paul. It gives a clear sense of identity and mission to the Church. It promotes a spirituality that focuses on God's kingship and on humankind's infinite distance from him. And according to Dulles this theory advanced by Karl Barth and others gives rise to a rich theology of the word. The weakness of this model lies in the fact that it



neglects the need to act upon the word rather than just proclaiming it. Also it needs a real visible community with a historical basis to provide unity rather than sponsoring a series of totally different happenings. There is a need not only for a profession of faith but rather a communion of life and love.

5. The Church as **Servant** is the last model presented by Dulles. It is distinct from the other four models in the sense that it does not view the world from a privileged position of power or authority. It focuses outside itself by stressing service to the whole person, not just to the spiritual part. The Church must be prophetic as well as pastoral. It must engage in serious social actions as well as preaching or administering the sacraments. This model draws its theology from the works of Teilhard, Bonhoeffer, McBrien and especially the Vatican II Council pastoral **Constitution on the Church in the Modern World**. It offers a new understanding of the relationship between the Church and the world of our day. It affirms that the Church must respect the accomplishments of the world and learn from them, lest it fall behind the times and become incapable of effectively heralding the gospel.<sup>31</sup> The biblical image of the suffering servant who heals, reconciles, and ministers to the needs of all men and women the world over is a very strong expression of the servant model. While this model does appeal to the modern Christian's sense of responsibility to the marginalized members of society it does not stress the traditional bonds of doctrine and sacraments that constitute a visible church structure. It promotes a sense of mutual brotherhood that springs up among those who join in Christian service to the world. The beneficiaries of this Church's actions are not primarily its members but are all who receive in their hour of need some emotional or material

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<sup>30</sup> Dulles, Avery, *Models of the Church*, page 71.

support. The mission of the Church in this context is not to recruit new members but rather to be of help to all men and women wherever they are. This model lacks solid biblical foundation and poses some ambiguities about the meaning of the word “servant.”

Dulles comments very well when he states:

“ As the institutional model of the Church recedes from its primacy, there is a shift from the categories of power to the categories of love and service. We may welcome the current stress on the servant Church as a sign of spiritual progress. But the concept of service must be carefully nuanced so as to keep alive the distinctive mission and identity of the Church.”<sup>32</sup>

The overview of these models does suggest that each one has specific merits as well as liabilities. It would appear to be sufficient to accept the ecclesiology of one model and apply it to a parish mission statement. However the application of any one model to the changing nature of the modern twenty-first century Catholic parish would be a monumental task. The natural give and take of parish ministry demands a great deal of imagination, innovative programming, and blending of theology and pastoral experience. It would be helpful at this point to identify some theological models for the parish as well as some historical and canonical status of the parish. This will prepare the reader for the chapter that describes the fundamental issues of dealing with the returning inactive Catholic.

#### **Part 4 Theological Models of the Parish**

The parish, as it is known and experienced today, is a product of history. Its early origins were the town-parishes run by priests or deacons in France, Rome, and Antioch of the fourth century. As integral parts of the bishop’s city parish they did not have any

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<sup>31</sup> *Gaudium et Spes*. Par. 62.

independence or great influence until the tenth or eleventh centuries. As dioceses expanded in numbers and influence and canon laws expanded the pastors' functions the parish churches became more and more independent of their bishops. The concept of parish was understood as a clearly defined territory forming a part of the diocese.

H.J.Schroeder in his book... *Canons and Degrees of the Council of Trent*... cites the main text that defines the canonical or legal status of the parish:

In those cities and localities where the parochial churches have no definite boundaries, and whose rectors have not their own people whom they may rule but administer the sacraments indiscriminately to all who desire them, the holy council commands the bishops that, for the greater security of the salvation of the souls committed to them, they divide the people into definite and distinct parishes and assign to each its own and permanent parish priest, who can know his people and from whom alone they may licitly receive the sacraments or that they make other, more beneficial provisions as the conditions of the locality may require. They shall also see to it that the same is done as soon as possible in those cities and localities where there are no parish churches.<sup>33</sup>

The Council of Trent clearly established the parish as a vitally important element in the life of the church but did so on a merely canonical basis. The rights and obligations of the pastor were considered to be of primary importance. It did not give proper consideration to the community and to the functions of the laity. The code of Canon Law, number 216, that was issued in the early twentieth century stated: "the territory of every diocese is to be divided into distinct territorial parts; to each part is to be assigned its own church with a definite part of the population, and its own rector as the proper pastor of that territory is to be put in charge for the necessary care of souls."<sup>34</sup> There is not much difference in the statements from the Council of Trent in the sixteenth century and the Code of Canon Law

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<sup>32</sup> Dulles, Avery, *Models of the Church*. Page 95.

<sup>33</sup> Schroeder, H.P. *Canons and Degrees of the Council of Trent*. St.Louis, Mo.: Herder Book Co. 1960. Pg. 204

<sup>34</sup> Killian, Sabbas, *Theological Models for the Parish*. New York: Alba House. 1977. Pg. 7.

in the twentieth century when describing the pastor and his duties. The terminology reflects an ecclesiology that is one-sidedly clerical and does not speak directly to the rights and needs of the parishioner. The parochial principle was clear. Parishioners were situated within a clearly defined territory that formed part of a diocese and the local priest alone was the valid minister of the sacraments.

There were early efforts in the twentieth century before the second Vatican Council to develop some theological notions of the parish that included the role of the community. The encyclical by Pope Pius XII...**Mystici Corporis**...opened more dialogue on the spiritual and supernatural concepts of Church rather than the juridical and hierarchical elements. The liturgical movement, officially begun by Pope Pius X in his 1903 **Motu Proprio**, led to the development of the concept of parish as a Eucharistic community. There was the emergence of a theology that embraced the idea of a pastoral approach that used the empirical discipline of counseling methods and techniques. There were also schools of thought that reduced the parish to merely an administrative unit of the Church. There were others that separated the supernatural from the natural or human elements of the parish. It is always important to keep in mind that the human condition is the locus of theology without which any revelation, no theology could ever have taken place. This *incarnational* principle affirms that the human and the divine are so intertwined that only when they are taken together is the theologian able to understand better the nature and the mission of the parish. The Vatican II council document, **Lumen Gentium**, paragraph eight, stated that the church is not to be considered two realities, namely a society furnished with a hierarchical visible agency and the Mystical Body of Christ. They form one interlocking reality, which is composed of a human, and a divine

element.<sup>35</sup> The communal structure of the Church is necessary for the understanding of the role of the people of God to be living instruments of Christ's spirit in building up of the Body. It is in the structure of the local church or parish that this dualism of body and spirit is experienced. Since the Church is both immanent and transcendent it must always be open and adaptable to new historical and cultural contexts. The parish embraces history and points to the Kingdom in the concrete experience of the Christian's human conditions. This important principle will be very helpful when reflecting on the models of the parish that Killian proposes.

#### **A. Sabbas Killian and five models of parish**

A model has two aspects. First it is an example to be imitated since it is rooted and expressed in biblical and historical understanding of God's intervention in history. Humankind responds to this intervention by practicing religious rituals. The second aspect of a model is that it signifies something to be done or to be made. These two aspects that embrace the past and look to the future thus profile a theological model in which revelation and the human condition are harmonized rather than opposed to each other. Killian states: "The parish is the place where the Church, in hearing the Word of God and celebrating the Eucharist, receives what she has already received historically in Christ but anew as if she had not received it at all. Retrospection and eschatological vision are accomplished in it."<sup>36</sup> Since the parish embraces history and points to the future revelation of the Kingdom this duality leads to a dual basis for reflection. Thus revelation offers the Word of God and the Eucharist as the historical context of the church community. And

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<sup>35</sup> *Lumen Gentium*, Paragraph eight.

<sup>36</sup> Killian, Sabas. *Theological Models for the Parish*. New York: Alba House. 1977. Pg. 48.

the human condition embraces the eschatological yearning for the full realization of the Kingdom of God here and now.

Killian proposes five models based on the data of human revelation or history, the elements of the human condition, and, finally, a combination of both based upon the American church experience.

1. A community gathered together to hear the Word of God
2. A community gathered together to celebrate the Eucharist
3. A local organization of the universal Church
4. A community restructured into small subcommunities
5. The agent of change called for in the American experience

**1. Word of God.** Killian reviews the history of the Old and New testaments in reference to how God's word, spoken through the prophets and Jesus, formed and guided the lives of the faithful. In revealing Himself in time God used human language that expressed a message within a historic situation. In the Hebrew scriptures God's word was the word of creation and the word of covenant that established the universe and created a chosen people. In the Christian scriptures the Word of God manifested in Jesus established a new covenant and a new people. The word of God is present in the Church especially in her liturgical celebrations.<sup>37</sup> The two great movements of the twentieth century, i.e., the liturgical movement and the biblical renewal, put more stress on the Word of God as an identifying character of the parish community. It is a powerful factor in creating faith communities. It has to be received always as a response to a human condition that challenges the believer to apply the principles of the Gospel with justice and charity.

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<sup>37</sup> *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Paragraph 7 & 33; Abbott, op .cit., pp. 141 & 149.

**2. Celebrate the Eucharist.** The next model considers the parish as a community gathered to celebrate the Eucharist. In the **Decree on the Ministry and Life of the Priests** from the second Vatican Council it is stated in the sixth paragraph: “No Christian community, however, can be built up unless it has its basis and center in the celebration of the Most Holy Eucharist.”<sup>38</sup> This centrality of the Eucharist in the Church has been affirmed by papal documents such as **Mediator Dei** by Pope Pius XII in 1947 and Pope Paul VI’s **Mysterium Fidei** in 1965. The Vatican Council stated in the **Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy**: “The liturgy is the summit toward which the activity of the church is directed; at the same time it is the fountain from which all her power flows.”<sup>39</sup> All these documents stress the centrality of the Eucharist in the Church. In the first six centuries of the Church the communal nature of the Eucharist was expressed in the style of the celebration with the bishop, deacons, presbyters and laity worshipping together around the altar. They used a common language and experienced the celebration of Mass as the actualization of the personal Christ in their midst. Later historical developments such as the feudal system where the churches were controlled by the nobles and monasteries, the shift from community to private celebration of Masses, and the lack of education among the clergy led to the loss of the sense of community. When the liturgical movement of the last century revived the communal aspect of Eucharist the return to this theological principle led to many reforms initiated by the Vatican II Council. Killian summarizes his reflections on the centrality of the Eucharist in these words:

“As the word of God reached its apex in the Incarnation, so partaking of the presence of the Lord culminates in the Eucharistic banquet. And as the Word of God was always

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<sup>38</sup> *Decree on the Ministry & Life of the Priest*. Par. 6.; Abbott, op .cit., pg. 545.

given for the benefit of mankind (sic) through the understanding and interpretation of the people of God, so the Eucharistic sacrifice recalls and re-creates the one sacrifice of the Lord through its celebration by a parish-community for the benefit of the universal Church and the good of mankind. (sic)”<sup>40</sup>

Whether the Eucharist is celebrated by the bishop in his cathedral or by local pastors in local congregations the symbol of charity and unity of the Mystical Body is present. **Lumen Gentium**, paragraph twenty-six of the Vatican II Council, teaches the centrality of local bishops in establishing the norms for Eucharistic celebrations. “He is the steward of the grace of the supreme priesthood, especially in the Eucharist, which he offers or causes to be offered, and by which the Church constantly lives and grows.”<sup>41</sup> After he stresses the role of the bishop as the primary leader in the Eucharistic community Killian suggests that there should be some experimentation in the local community. He asks how the local church can grow in awareness of belonging to the Lord and to one another and of being the concrete realization of all those who are equally members of the Lord’s body. He mentions that Andrew Greeley back in 1966 suggested subcommunities for urban parishes. They would be small faith based groups that would exist in the parish and would provide a structure for relating to other units in the parish. This linking in the parish would be approached as an event with the Eucharist and the gifts of the Spirit giving a unique personality, presence, and power to the community.

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<sup>39</sup> *Constitution on the Sacred Liturgy*. Par. 10. Abbott, op. cit., pg. 142.

<sup>40</sup> *Theological Models for the Parish*. Killian, Sabas, op. cit.; pg. 79

<sup>41</sup> *Lumen Gentium*. Documents of Vatican II. Abbott, Walter. op. cit., Page 50.



**3. Local Organization.** A third model is the parish as a local organization of the Universal Church. This approach is based on liturgy and the human condition. The **Decree on the Apostolate to the Laity**, paragraph 10, encourages the laity to be in close union with the priests and bring to the parish their own and the world's problems to be examined and resolved by common deliberation.<sup>42</sup> The parish needs the following elements to achieve this goal, namely, an organizational setup in the parish, a forum for dialogue and consensus, members formed by the word of God and the Eucharist, available spokesmen for the community, and believers in the work of the Holy Spirit as the agent of the community.

This parish model must avoid the inbreeding of exclusive parish oriented activities. It is called to be the bearer of the universal church that is concretely actualized in its sacramental Eucharistic celebrations. It needs to be a sign of God's presence to the world. In a sense it is called to be a kind of cell of the diocese.<sup>43</sup> In such a role it studies the movement of families in and out of the parish to provide structures of growth to assist the in-migration and out-migration of these groups. A final consequence of the parish as local organization of the universal church is the rethinking of the missionary nature of the church. In today's culture it is becoming more and more apparent to even the casual observer that Christianity is not the motivating factor in day to day living. The Catholic Church is finding itself to be more and more in the role of a minority-status institution with little or no influence in the public domain. The parish will be most effective in transforming men and women's lives when there will be effective interaction between the structures of

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<sup>42</sup> *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity*. Abbott, Walter. op.cit.,Page 501

<sup>43</sup> This concept is mentioned in the *Decree on the Apostolate of the Laity* in Abbott, Walter. op. cit. Page 501

the Church and the world of humankind. Pope John XXIII frequently said that it was important for the church to read the signs of the times. The Church can respond to this challenge when the members of the local parish embrace wholeheartedly their duty to share the Good News of Sa'vation with their neighbors and all who are searching for truth and peace.

**4. Small Subcommunities.** The parish restructured into small subcommunities.

Every parish has natural groupings of parishioners that focus on a specific task, prayer experience, ministry, etc. It is an easy step to organize such groups into small faith communities that would meet on a regular basis, perhaps weekly in a home, and then return to the parish for common celebration of the Eucharist. These faith-based communities have been very common in the third world countries in the last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. In the American Church experience today it is important to balance both structure and personal attitudes. The Parish must be a community of worship, charity, witness and apostolate. These are the same criteria that help test and verify previous models of the church. In any restructuring of the parish it is critical to assess the availability of priests and staff. Vocation shortage highlights today the need for careful evaluation of personnel and programming. This model may appeal to the postmodern Christian, i.e. a person with little or no formal religious background and who is very critical of any lay or clerical authority. How this model will evolve and develop in the twenty-first century Catholic Church life has yet to be fully experienced.

## 5. The American Parish. The agent of change in the American Parish.

Killian uses the four elements of religious sociology formulated by Casiano Floristan explaining how they intervene in people's lives.<sup>44</sup> The social, psychological, geographical, and historical realities of the world do influence the formation of any life, whether individual or communal. The parish is no exception. The growth of the American parish from early pre-Revolutionary times to the present had an unevenness that ranged from sporadic missionary activity to the struggle with lay trusteeism. Early American Catholic bishops such as John Carroll and John England sought to mediate the role of the laity, personal religious freedom, the nature of authority in the Church, and the drive toward community with varied success. The failure of early Church leaders to adapt and to allow the laity have a voice in change really did not stop the inevitable. Change did happen and still is a strong factor in church structure today. The interaction between the Word of God and His graces and the actuality of the human condition has been greatly experienced in the life of the American parishes. As the American parish evolves three factors are present in the church that are shaping its future. They are the preoccupation with the question of authority, the presence of freedom in every aspect of the religious life of the Church, and, finally a very strong drive and demand toward community. For any parish that is reaching out to the alienated and searching modern man and woman it is critical to remember that the Church cannot start its operations from where she thinks people should be, but from where they actually are.

### B. The Parish in the Catholic Tradition

Some comments and observations about parish history and structure in general are helpful at this point to introduce the emerging parish of the twenty-first century. James A. Coriden, professor of Canon Law at the Catholic University of America in Washington, DC, has authored a book that is most helpful in understanding the meaning of the parish in the United States. *The Parish in Catholic Tradition... History, Theology and Canon Law* presents a background and a context for contemporary Catholic parishes.<sup>45</sup>

Coriden describes the growth of parish from its biblical sources and medieval background to modern times. Local Christian congregations began to be called parishes as early as the second century. The original meaning of parish is to live near or beside. It has the sense, therefore, of people living in the same neighborhood. Another meaning of the Greek word *parokia* was a resident alien, one living in a foreign land. This was translated into the spiritual sense to describe the communities whose true homeland was in heaven, who were only pilgrims here on earth. A *parokia* or parish soon came to mean an individual church living in the world. It became an accepted term for individual congregations within the larger church. By the sixth century the church was defined by our now common examples of diocese and parish.

But what is the definition of today's parish in the official sense and also in the common understanding of the average parishioner? The new code of canon law, published in 1983, defines the parish as "a definite community of the Christian faithful

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<sup>44</sup> *Theological Models for the Parish*. Killian, Sabbas, op. cit. Page 114.

<sup>45</sup> *The Parish in Catholic Tradition. History, Theology & Canon Law*. Coriden, James A. Paulist Press. N.Y. 1997.

established on a stable basis within a particular church: the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop.”<sup>46</sup>

The term community was chosen to signify something more than a territory or a mere grouping of people. Community means people who know each other, have common values, and relate to each other. Therefore a church community will worship together, grow in faith, and face the crises of life together. There will be the common experiences of baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc. The use of the word **definite** means simply that the community is well defined. There are language, territorial or social parameters that determine the nature of the parish.

What do parishes do traditionally?

1. Proclamation and formation.
2. Worship and sacramental celebration.
3. Works of charity and care.
4. Outreach and social concerns.

These categories of parishioner activities are stated in contemporary terms. Most active Catholics can identify with them. However, there are a lot of Catholics who still do not see themselves as defined by these categories. They call themselves seekers, searchers or occasional members. Commitment or even the basic identification with a local parish is not a given for them. The real pastoral challenge is to reach out to them in a way that is attractive, exciting and spiritually fulfilling.

In this chapter an overview of the theology of the Church and its local structure, the parish, was developed from the theological perspectives of the Second Vatican Council documents and theologians such as Killian and Dulles. The models are attempts to

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<sup>46</sup> *Code of Canon Law*. Washington, D.C.: CLSA, 1983. Canon 515.1

define the local church as an instrument of the Holy Spirit bringing the good news of Salvation to a world that is very much alienated yet searching for truth and happiness. Any attempt to define the parish by one of the models does limit its effectiveness and appeal to the returning inactive Catholic parishioner. It is clear from the Vatican II Council Documents that the Church is constantly renewing itself, seeking new means to reach the hearts and minds of the faithful, and above all, recognizing the reality of its limitations. The people of God, as a pilgrim church, are called to mutual support and cooperation by virtue of their baptismal call to be kings, prophets, and priests. This sacred duty is no longer the strict domain of the hierarchy alone. The call to conversion and renewal can be heard in the prayers and reflections of the local church.

The structure of Church as understood before the nineteen sixties is no longer accepted by many as the instrument that is best suited to the postmodern Christian of the twenty-first century. The emphasis upon power and position does not image the model of a faith community that is centered on the Eucharist and strives to be a servant. The most appealing model that can gather those members from the pre-Vatican era and attract the post-Vatican seeker will include this notion of small faith communities, nourished by the Eucharist, that reach out in servant ministry to all men and women.

What is the Church today? And how is it defined? The Church is this instrument of salvation that expresses itself in modern terms such as servant church, eucharistic assembly, proclaimer of the Word of God, and sign of Christ's presence. All these define an aspect of the ever-expanding mystery of the power and presence of the Eternal Word incarnated in the lives of those men and women who accepted Him as Lord and Savior. Jesus did not abandon this world to wander aimlessly for the signs of the Kingdom. Jesus

commissioned his apostles and their successors to teach, baptize and announce the coming of the Kingdom to the entire world. That work is being done today in every parish that is faithful to this call to teach, rule, and to sanctify. As people return to active membership in the parish they need to hear that the Church is on that pilgrimage of faith along with them, seeking reconciliation and forgiveness for past hurts and injuries, and demonstrating in word and example that the Eucharist assembly is the true bond of unity and charity. In a world filled with uncertainty and instability it is important to assure these returnees that there is a Church community that has a sound foundation of faith and morality. It is identified as one, holy, catholic, and apostolic. Its fundamental teachings about Christ and the Church are contained in the ancient apostolic and Nicene creeds or professions of faith. The Church has sound teaching authority that is tempered by a compassionate understanding of the frailties of its members.

It is in the parish, the concrete and local realization of the Universal Church, that the ministry of word, worship, and service is shared and received. The theology of the Church and parish may not be clearly understood by the parishioners whether long standing or newly arrived. But they can be led to a vision of Church and its mission by a supportive and understanding pastoral staff. Each parish has its unique personal characteristics of staff and membership. They will formulate a vision of church as they together reflect on their experiences as a faith community that proclaims in word and deed the presence of Christ. There will be the paradigm shift in the understanding of the parish of the twenty-first century. The old model that appealed to the pre-Vatican Catholic provided a safe haven, a comfort zone that was rarely questioned or challenged. When the emergence of telecommunication technology and the information explosion burst upon the

American scene in the eighties and nineties most people were not prepared to handle it. One very dramatic and disturbing result was the overload of facts and dissemination of truth that created a real problem of credibility. Who and what was to be believed and accepted when the Internet, the television and radio commentators offered conflicting interpretations of the identical event or statement.

The changes in the local parish are dramatic as well. Perhaps the greatest impact on the parish is the decreasing numbers of priests and religious that are staffing those parishes. The vocation crisis of the sixties and the seventies is impacting the parishes today. And, as a result, there is more dependency upon the parish lay volunteer to staff and run programs that were previously the sole domain of the clergy and religious. Shifting demographic patterns that see the outmigration of Catholics from the inner city to the suburb have changed the demographics of the suburban and rural parish. School and parish closings in the city have led to building or remodeling larger parishes in the suburbs. People move from parish to parish depending on their personal needs and wants. There seems to be little or no concern to build and support a faith community since most parents want a school community for their children's education. As negative as this may seem there is real hope for changing attitudes by using new paradigms or models to engage the emerging laity. The call of baptism to serve the church faithfully and zealously needs to be heard by all members of the Church. The modern Catholic will rise to serve and lead if given the proper motivation and support.

In this chapter there has been an attempt to demonstrate from the documents of the second Vatican council and the writings of theologians the need to look beyond the pre-Vatican II models of the church. The Church, the parish, the parishioner of the 21<sup>st</sup>



century are quite different now. The models of today's Church can vary from one parish to another. A diocese in the third world country of Africa cannot be compared to an urban American diocese. The needs and concerns such as issues of justice, peace, finances, personnel, and membership can vary dramatically from diocese to diocese. The local church directed by the bishop oversees the parishes which are in turn administered by the duly appointed pastor. The pastor's vision of church and his leadership are the primary elements for any true spiritual leadership and shared ministry for the parishioners. Whatever model he embraces, be that of servant, minister of the word, Eucharistic community, small faith community, or a combination of them, he must base it upon the solid teachings of the Second Vatican Council.

It is evident from the current sexual crises in the American Catholic Church since January 2002, that this imperfect membership of the Church established by Christ is in need of purification and reform. Christ promised that the church would offer salvation to all who embrace it. He did not promise that there would be freedom from dissent, persecution, and legitimate renewal. The pastor who is open to change and growth in his ministry will present to his parishioners a vision of Church that is based on hope and confidence in the guidance of the Holy Spirit. Realistically he will reflect on those documents and commentaries that can offer guidance and support for his theological understanding of the church today. In this study it is proposed that the pastor when welcoming new parishioners can begin to instruct them on the concept of responsible membership that is based on their baptism commitment. A catechesis that embraces this theology will affirm the newcomers' entrance into a welcoming and caring faith community. In the second chapter there will be an overview of what the returning Catholic

is looking for in his or her new parish. Their expectations sometimes may not be met due to their faulty concepts of church and parish. However, the pastor who is aware of this and also is able to guide them gently to an understanding of the modern parish, will be an effective and supportive spiritual leader. A pastor who has hope for the future will have the energy to deal with the present. There is much hope for the church of the future when the pastor and his staff can welcome the returning inactive Catholic with sincere compassion, true joy, and a spirit of reconciliation.

## **Chapter Two**

### **Why Catholics are returning to the Church**

This chapter will deal with the survey of the material in the last fifteen years that is dealing with the returning Catholic. Much of the information has been researched from magazine articles and theological essays as far back as 1982. The comments from the returning Catholic give much insight into the reasons for their renewal of faith. And, sad to say, it also demonstrates the lack of pastoral sensitivity and theological reflection that alienated many Catholics in the seventies and eighties of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

There are two facts that are clearly understood today among pastors and other church leaders. The first is that many inactive members are slowly returning to active roles in the church. The second is that there is a significant turndown of Sunday Mass attendance among Catholics. Add to this the vocation crisis that is lowering the ranks of the active clergy. Because of this, many parishes throughout the country are experiencing major setbacks in the staffing of pastors and associates. There is also the crisis of authority, the disagreement with major moral issues, especially birth control, abortion, and women's rights. All these variables combine to foster confusion and a sense of moral independence in the minds of the average Catholic.

Another result of all these issues is that in most parishes the membership fluctuates across parish boundaries with no real concern for allegiance, pride, or support. Families or individuals will register in a parish after they have shopped around or decided that the parish will fulfill their immediate needs. No longer can the pastor depend on the time honored custom of knowing that the majority of the families that lived in his parish

boundaries were registered members and attended church faithfully. Therefore the problem does arise about what does it mean to be a member of a parish. Also, how does an active Catholic parish reach out to evangelize and share the good news with those alienated former active folks who do not respond to the normal or typical way of belonging to a faith community?

In his book, *The Catholic Parish*, Thomas Sweester studies the shifting patterns in the American Catholic parish. He writes that in the years between 1960-1975 there was 30% less involvement among active members.<sup>1</sup> The dominant pattern that is emerging is that Catholics are inclined to make up their own minds, not only in their involvement in parish life, but in their values orientation as well. The Catholic Church and the parish are still their guide, but not their sole authority. The American Catholic Church, in other words, is becoming a voluntary Church much like the Protestant tradition of membership.

“The drop in parish involvement, the freedom people feel to attend Mass or not, the spreading out of parish decision-making to include the laity, the Catholic’s personal and moral values orientation which follows cultural rather than religious norms, all these facets of the current situation point to a voluntaristic, pluralistic Catholic religion.”<sup>2</sup>

There are really as many reasons for leaving the Church as there are people. It seems that there are some basic factors that cause an active Catholic to become inactive. Susan Roll quotes James Lopresti, S.J., in her article in the summer 1991 issue of *Doctrine and Life*.<sup>3</sup> He uses the term alienation or disidentification with the Church. There are three kinds: the **unawakened** who have not been touched by the Gospel, the **true alienated** who have consciously rejected the Gospel at some point in their lives, and the

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<sup>1</sup> Sweester, Thomas. *The Catholic Parish*. Chicago: Center for Scientific Study of Religion. 1994. Page 79.

<sup>2</sup> *ibid.* page 79.

**prophetically alienated** who withdraw from active participation in the liturgical and social life of the church community in protest at some injustice or hypocrisy they perceive in the church.<sup>4</sup> Pastors can readily identify these distinctions when speaking or rather listening to those parishioners who are honest enough to share their feelings with them. Today there are people leaving the church because of the current sexual crisis among the clergy and the apparent cover up of this problem by some bishops of the American hierarchy. This exodus is precipitated by the apparent insensitivity and hard ball tactics of church lawyers in dealing with the victims of abuse. Many faithful Catholics are outraged by the scandalous activities of men who have dedicated themselves to service in the Church yet fail to live up to their sacred commitments. The reality is that the numbers of these clergy offenders are lower in this category than any other group. But there is still the heightened publicity and public attacks against the church's credibility that confuses the issue and leads to more emotional reactions than reasoned arguments. The prophetically alienated Catholic, more vocal today and more numerous than he or she was twenty-five years ago, is being heard loud and clear not only from the pews but on the front steps of many cathedrals in the United States.

There are other definitions to describe the modern-day Catholic. A very popular description is the "a la Carte or cafeteria Catholic." This catchy phrase appeals to those individuals with special tastes for their brand of religious beliefs and morals. Pick and choose as one wants to believe and follow without concern for consistency and truth. Flannan Markham deplores the use of this label given to Catholics who leave the church as

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<sup>3</sup> Susan Roll, *Alienated Catholics and a Penitent Church*, *Doctrine and Life* 41 (Summer 1991): 338-44.

<sup>4</sup> *Ibid.*, page 338-339.

being an “a la Carte” Catholic. He agrees with theologian Karl Rahner that there is room for legitimate dissent in the church even to the highest level.<sup>5</sup> There are even definitions of the word “parishioner” that are based on the individual’s levels of involvement in the church. Many authors use the definitions: **nuclear, modal, marginal and nominal**. Thomas Sweester clarifies these levels by the Sunday Mass attendance records.

**Nuclear.....** Mass at least once a week.

**Modal.....** Attends Sunday Mass but not involved in more than one parish activity.

**Marginal.....** Mass once a month or less.

**Nominal.....** Mass four times a year and no involvement in the parish.

It is the experience of many pastors today that there are many parishioners who attend Mass perhaps once a month but still consider themselves very active. They would be insulted and very surprised if they would be called marginal members of the parish. Many times the lines that define active and inactive are very blurred because it appears that the average Catholic still holds on to his or her religious roots and, despite disagreement with church teachings and policies, truly feels part of the Church community.

The former criterion of active membership based on Sunday Mass attendance has given way to a new paradigm shift. Different behavioral models as well as assimilation of different theological backgrounds create a pattern that ebbs and flows with the tides of popular opinions, self help theological manuals, and charismatic spiritual leaders. This creates a great deal of confusion for the postmodern Christian who is identified basically by his or her being born in the 1960’s and later. Their choices of belief, morals, and

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<sup>5</sup> Flannan Markham. *On being a Catholic “a la carte”*. *Doctrine and Life* 40 (Dec. 1990): 529-33. Markham reflects in this article that dissent doesn’t necessarily mean to be inactive.

worship are challenged by the lack of confidence in civil and ecclesiastical authority, and the disenchantment with previous belief systems that promised peace, prosperity, and certitude. The postmodern Catholic today does not seem to place regular Sunday worship and active ministry in the same category as was generally accepted in the 50's and 60's of the 20<sup>th</sup> century. There is the desire for spirituality and community, however, that often finds its source outside the normal parameters of the average Catholic parish. In the 20<sup>th</sup> century, modernism fostered the belief that science was the sole road to truth. When the scientific community itself began to doubt the validity of many of its previous claims, the believing Christian also began to doubt the doctrine of a religion that claimed many of its statements were corroborated by science. The conflict between faith and science led to the phenomenon of the postmodern Christian. Such an individual challenges all claims to truth, authority, and authenticity while still searching for a faith that offers stability, community, and to some degree, an authentic teaching authority. This paradox of conflicting concepts fairly well describes today's searching and questioning Christian. While difficult to define clearly all the elements of the post modern Christian it is still very evident that the baby boomers of the 60's and 70's and today's 21<sup>st</sup> millennium Christian are quite distinct from the mid 20<sup>th</sup> century Christian.<sup>6</sup>

In an age that is characterized by slogans, bumper stickers and billboards that announce even messages from God Himself, it is apparent that many Catholics find it fashionable and very acceptable to design labels for themselves. To be a liberal, a conservative, a middle of the road advocate, a pro-lifer, or pro-choice are just some of many labels that can identify a lay Catholic parishioner today. Robert Edward Burns in the

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<sup>6</sup> Confer notes by Gary L. Comstock in his article: *Is Postmodern Religious Dialogue Possible? Faith*

June 1989 issue of *U.S. Catholic* comments that religion has been infected with the virus of slogan dependency.<sup>7</sup> The fashionable term “cafeteria Catholic” is used in a pejorative sense to define those weak Catholics who pick and choose Catholic doctrines and precepts acceptable to them. Many see no wrong or problem in this. There is the ultimate authority of the person’s conscience, properly informed and guided by the church’s teaching, that is responsible before God for his or her decision. When slogans and titles are presented it is very important to deal with this individual with respect, kindness, and true pastoral concern. Today’s confused, poorly educated, lapsed or alienated Catholic can be tomorrow’s truly born again active Catholic. An individual who can be shaped and guided by responding to the challenges of the 21<sup>st</sup> century Church is the object of the new evangelization.

There are many labels that pastoral teams place on formerly active parishioners. It seems that the most common one is the alienated Catholic. The emphasis has shifted dramatically from the person being at fault to the church or church official being at fault. In other words, it seems that the institutional church itself may be the leading cause of much anxiety, frustration, and very real pain for its membership. For instance, the disclosure in the Catholic Church during 2002 of priestly pedophilia and episcopal mishandling of this serious problem has led to a crisis of authority and faith among many Catholics in the United States. The damage from this has yet to be assessed from the perspective of lost membership, decreased contributions, and fewer religious vocations.

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and Philosophy. (April 1989): page 196.

<sup>7</sup> *Who can pass judgment on the Joneses?* Robert E. Burns. *U.S. Catholic* 54:Je 1989. Pg. 2.



Theresa Chupp used the word disaffected rather than alienated when she wrote in the 1985 winter issue of *Pastoral Psychology*.<sup>8</sup> She defines a disaffected Roman Catholic as “a Roman Catholic who is uncomfortable in the Church, one who disagrees with Church doctrine or practice, one who practices Catholicism irregularly, or who does not consider him/herself part of the main body of the faithful.”<sup>9</sup> The Hoge study, sponsored by the National Conference of Catholic Bishops in 1981 stated that 42% of all Catholics drop out from active membership some time in their lives. While most of them eventually return to the church, they only return on their own terms and with their own agenda. Teresa Chupp’s study points out factors in the lives of the 13 interviewees that indicate disaffection with the church was not peculiar to a certain stage or stages. Since faith development is such a personal journey for each person there can be no dominant cause for alienation. However Chupp does conclude her study with the suggestion on how the church can change for future growth. The Church needs to encourage and teach meditation. She should never lose sight of its commitment to social justice, and should work to integrate this with its spiritual practice. Finally, the Church should become more open to questioning and input from the laity, and should even foster this.<sup>10</sup> These prophetic remarks from the mid 1980’s only tend to strengthen the conviction that so many of the lapsed and alienated Catholics in our midst are still Catholic at heart.

Many Catholics leave the Church because of the difficulty they experience with marriage regulations and procedures with the annulment process. These are people whose faith was never founded firmly on the teachings and sacramental life of the Church. They

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<sup>8</sup> *Disaffected Roman Catholics: Developmental Considerations*. Teresa Chupp. *Pastoral Psychology* Vol.34 (2) winter 1985.

<sup>9</sup> *Ibid.* pg. 93.

may have been sacramentalized but never catechized or evangelized. In other words, they may have been baptized, confirmed, and even received first Holy Communion but never really understood or accepted what it all meant. To accept the Lord as Savior and to live that reality as a mature Catholic was not a factor for many cradle Catholics of the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century.

Patrick Brennan and Daron M. Melendez discuss the issue of re-involving the inactive or fallen away Catholics in an article from *Chicago Studies*.<sup>11</sup> They mention the 1988 book by George Gallup, *The Unchurched American*, that named the phenomenon, “the crisis of believing vs. belonging,” as being rather common today. There are a growing number of people who consider themselves religious or spiritual, people of faith with a prayer life. But also on the rise is the number of people who say that they do not need a church or a faith community to support their own beliefs or to offer moral direction. Numbers are very hard to identify or even to calculate. But it is a growing concern for all pastors who want to give these people some real substantial offerings of faith growth and community life. A basic difficulty is to determine the concept of what is a parish and who is a parishioner. Since our American society is so mobile, people are on the move constantly from one city to another. In many parishes there is an average turnover of families approximately 20% every year. With this kind of movement it is very difficult to locate potential parishioners and to involve them in the life of the faith community.

James A. Coriden, professor of Canon Law at the Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., in his book, *The Parish in Catholic Tradition, History, Theology*,

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<sup>10</sup> Ibid. pg. 99.

<sup>11</sup> *Long Gone and Returning: Home-Re-Involving Inactive Catholics*. Robert Brennan & Daron Mayer Melendez. *Chicago Studies* 199332(2) 100-114.

*and Canon Law*, presents a background and a context for contemporary Catholic parishes.<sup>12</sup> Coriden describes the growth of parish from its biblical sources and medieval background to modern times. Local Christian congregations began to be called parishes as early as the second century.<sup>13</sup> The original meaning of parish is to live near or beside. It has the sense, therefore, of people living in the same neighborhood. Another meaning of the Greek word *parokia* (parish) was a resident alien, one living in a foreign land. This translated into the spiritual sense to describe the communities of those whose true homeland was in heaven, and were only pilgrims here on earth. A *parokia* or parish soon came to mean an individual church living in the world. It became an accepted term for individual congregations within the larger church. By the sixth century the church was defined by our now common example of diocese and parish.

But what is the definition of today's parish in the official sense and also in the common understanding of the average parishioner? The Code of Canon Law, published in 1983, defines the parish as "a definite community of the Christian faithful established on a stable basis within a particular church: the pastoral care of the parish is entrusted to a pastor as its own shepherd under the authority of the diocesan bishop."<sup>14</sup> The term *community* was chosen to signify something more than a territory or a mere grouping of people. Community means people who know each other, have common values, and relate to each other. Therefore a church community will worship together, grow in faith, and face the crises of life together. There will be the common sacramental experiences of

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<sup>12</sup> . *The Parish in Catholic Tradition, History, Theology and Canon Law*. James A. Coriden. Paulist Press. N.Y. 1997

<sup>13</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 19.

<sup>14</sup> *Code of Canon Law. Latin-English Edition*. Canon Law Society of America. Washington, D.C. Canon 515

baptisms, weddings, funerals, etc. The use of the word *definite* simply means that the community is well defined. There are language, territorial or social perimeters that determine the nature of every parish

Coriden was quoted in the first chapter and, although some of his material is mentioned here, it is still important to have a clear idea of the notion of parish and membership. His categories of parishioner activities are stated in contemporary terms and most Catholics can identify with them. However, there are many Catholics who still do not see themselves defined by these categories. Whether it be the notion of a parish or its activities, they define themselves loosely as seekers or unattached. Commitment or even the basic identification with a local parish is not a given for them. The real pastoral challenge is to reach out to them in a way that is attractive, exciting, and spiritually fulfilling.

It is rather evident from the writings of the theologians, both speculative and pastoral, that there are very deep seated and serious reasons for many previously active Catholics to leave the church. The materialism, skepticism, self-indulgent life style, and lack of solid Christian formation are huge obstacles to face and overcome. And so, what are some rays of hope shining over the horizon? Can the official Church in the 21<sup>st</sup> century impact in a meaningful way on the lives of the millennium Christian? Although it is over thirty five years since the end of the Second Vatican Council there are still documents and teachings that are just as relevant today as they were then.

The Council's **Decree on the Church's Missionary Activity (Ad Gentes)** states that the formation of local churches, that is, the parish, is the work of the Holy Spirit who begets in Baptism new life in those who believe in Christ, who gathers them

together in the one People of God. The parish is described in the following paragraph from the Second Vatican Council document **Ad Gentes**:

“Missionaries, as God’s co-workers, are to raise up congregations of the faithful who will walk in a manner worthy of the vocation to which they have been called, and will exercise the priestly, prophetic, and royal office which God has entrusted to them. In this way, the Christian community becomes a sign of God’s presence in the world. For by reason of the Eucharistic Sacrifice, this community is ceaselessly on the way with Christ to the Father. Carefully nourished in the word of God, it bears witness to Christ. And, finally, it walks in love and glows with an apostolic spirit.” ( AG15)<sup>15</sup>

These words are very challenging today as they were over thirty five years ago. To walk in love and to glow with an apostolic spirit are beautiful ideals. However, the reality for the searching, highly critical inactive or alienated Catholic is to find a parish that lives up to this ideal. And so many will literally shop around for a parish that will appeal to them. If there are four or five churches nearby, each one will be visited within a year or so by a searching Catholic for the purpose of registering and becoming active. There is much discussion among local pastors as to how to welcome these seekers since many will choose a church that is not necessarily the closest one or the most available one. In the years before Vatican II it was the official policy of the diocese that all parishioners must be living within the territorial boundaries of the local parish. There were some exceptions for the nationality parishes. But it was always the expectation that all parishioners would attend the church in their neighborhood. That is not the situation today. People will attend a parish that will feed them spiritually as well as socially. Even though church law states that a parishioner must live within a parish boundary in order to be an official member, this law is no longer being enforced or followed in many dioceses. If there is a change in the

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<sup>15</sup>. *Parish in Catholic Tradition*. James A. Coriden. Pg. 46.

staffing of the parish that displeases a parishioner, he or she feels free to belong to another parish.

Law identifies a parishioner in Canons 96, 102, and 204. These directives indicate that all of the baptized Catholics within the territory of the parish who remain in communion with the church are eligible to be members of the parish. In actual practice, parish membership is often a matter of personal preference or family choice. And so, when somebody wants to return to the Church and be part of the faith community, what are the pre-existing motives or incentives that can be identified?

James W. Lewis in his comments in the May 1994 issue of *Christian Century* says that the baby boomers (born between 1946-1964) are seeking four “commodities:” **religious education for their children, personal support, sense of community, and inspiration and spiritual guidance.**<sup>16</sup> This appears to be a theme that runs through the articles and books written in the past ten years. However, even there is the question about the identity crisis. What does it mean to be a Catholic at the present time? This question even predates the one about what does it mean to be a parishioner. Margaret O’Brien Steinfelds in an essay entitled, “*Are Catholics Active Enough in Their Church,*” comments about membership and Catholic identity.<sup>17</sup> She identifies four aspects of the identity crisis: **There is an erosion of understanding of authority in our culture and in our church; Religious affiliation is voluntary; The American Church is comfortable about**

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<sup>16</sup> *Baby Boomers: The Lapsed and the Loyal*. Christian Century. James W. Lewis. May 18-25, 1994.

<sup>17</sup> *American Catholic Identity. Essays in an Age of Change*. Edited by Francis J. Butler. Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward, 1994. Article by Margaret O’Brien Steinfelds. *Are Catholics Active Enough in the Church?*

modernity; We have moved from ethnicity and cultural boundaries to new concepts about what is church, who owns the church, and who says what's Catholic.<sup>18</sup>

When people with these ideas and all the hurts and confusion about Church rules and regulations want to return, what can be done to welcome them home? Peter Verily in his article, *The Angry, Frustrated and Forgotten Ones*, says "more efforts are needed to listen and support the sinner than be concerned about the power struggles in the church."<sup>19</sup> Perhaps Verily is referring to those pastors who are competing for increasing membership as a sign or symbol of influence among fellow pastors. Many authors of popular magazines like *Liguorian*, *Catholic Digest* and *Our Sunday Visitor* stress the importance of prayer and listening to those wounded and alienated former active members. It is interesting to read Andrew Greeley's remarks in the August 8, 1987 issue of *America- Why Catholics Stay in the Church*. After his criticism of the bishops, poor preaching, tactless priests, et cetera, Greeley says that Catholics stay and, by extension, they also return because of the Church's focus on identity, community, and the sacraments. In particular, this means the Eucharist, especially the celebration of Mass.<sup>20</sup>

It is evident that many alienated and former practicing Catholics are returning to a parish and to some form of membership. But they are doing it on their own terms. Cardinal Godfried Danneels, archbishop of Mechelen-Brussels, Belgium, in an address to his fellow Cardinals in Rome in May 2001, described the returning inactive Catholic as a person who is in love with rites and ritualization, but is allergic to the Christian

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<sup>18</sup> *ibid.*, pg. 35.

<sup>19</sup> *The Angry, Frustrated and Forgotten Ones*. Peter Verily, *Priest and People* 1:26-9 Ap. 1987.

<sup>20</sup> *Why Catholics stay in the Church*. Andrew Greeley. *America*: August 8, 1987.

sacraments.<sup>21</sup> In addition to this complicated pastoral dilemma there is the challenge for the clergy to explain to many disbelievers the Church's official teachings in the areas of sexuality and marriage. It appears that so many of them have made up their minds about these issues as they directly impact upon their daily lives and therefore, they will live with these decisions.

William J. Bausch has written extensively about the parish of the new millennium, the returning Catholics, and the means to welcome them. As a pastor of a very large parish on the East Coast and a lecturer on the convention circuits, Bausch brings a certain expertise and insight to any reflection about the parish and parishioner. Bausch's two books, *Parish of the Next Millennium* and *Catholic in Crisis*, are filled with statistics, facts, and quotations from numerous polls and surveys. Much of them describe the past and present status of the Catholic Church in America. The author is familiar with this from his own experience as a priest since 1962. Whether describing the baby boomers, the X generation or the millennium Christian it all comes down to the basic approach of caring, participating and enabling. If there is compassion there will be a change of heart and attitude. If there is involvement or participation in the life of the parish there will be understanding. And if each person is treated with dignity, respect, and appreciation there certainly will be enthusiasm and support.

Whatever the parish of this new millennium will become is still an open discussion. Will it be a small faith community, compact in numbers, but expansive in ministry? Will the church of the future imitate the mega-church of the evangelical or independent Christian congregation? Will the church disintegrate or rather form itself into

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<sup>21</sup> *The Contemporary Person and the Church*. Godfried Dannells. *America*: July 30-August 6, 2001. Pg.



small parish-based communities that meet in the marketplace, home, or school and then gather for weekly or monthly Eucharist depending upon the availability of an ordained priest? Whatever profile will emerge there will always be people who identify themselves as active members of a faith community. Baush in his book, *Parish of the Next Millennium*, stated that every parish will continue to have the three basic functions of priest, prophet and king.<sup>22</sup> He lists twelve summary points on pages 276-279 that summarize his thesis about the future church. They are truly innovative and challenging thoughts. What is memorable about them is that they are listed as achievable goals to meet the challenges of current pastoral life. People, not just programs; collaboration rather than edict; dignity of the person rather than power and office...these are good pastoral values.

George Gallup, Jr., and Jim Castelli in their 1987 book, *The American Catholic People: Their Beliefs, Practices and Values*, wrote that the American Catholic was alive and well and facing the future with renewed hope. Their surveys and polls indicated that the U.S. Church has tolerated internal dissent as a means of keeping the Church intact. Their research indicated that on a practical level, the only belief that separates many active and inactive Catholics is the belief that they are "in" and the belief by inactive Catholics that they are "out."<sup>23</sup> This defining factor not only simplifies the distinction between inactive and active but it really overlooks what I think is the very fundamental problem facing the church today, namely, the inability to welcome and retain the potential returning inactive Catholic. It is one thing to offer a multitude of programs designed to help the inactive or alienated Catholic to assimilate Catholic doctrine and discipline. But it is a

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<sup>22</sup> *The Parish of the Next Millennium*. William J. Baush. Mystic, CT. 23<sup>rd</sup> Publications. 1997.

more important reality to provide the pathway to those means. Our absent brothers and sisters are not returning with eagerness to join a committee. They are searching in their own individual ways for God, renewal, reconciliation, and hopefully, a vibrant faith-filled and loving community. They want to be accepted on their own terms at least in the beginning. A harsh and insensitive first meeting with the parish staff can be devastating to the returning Catholic. The time for change and renewal will eventually come through the grace and power of the Holy Spirit.

All the books and articles that have been researched stress the need to be sensitive to the needs of the returning inactive parishioner. How to do that is left to the creativity of the pastoral staff and the backing of the parishioners. At an Evangelization workshop in Cleveland, Ohio (August 2001) a statistic about young adult population made a definite impression on the audience. Forty percent of our nation's population is nineteen and under. This means that a huge effort must be made to review current youth ministry's visions and goals since it is rather obvious that 40% of our Sunday Mass attendance does not include this age group.

There is too much being written and spoken about the negative factors in religion. More needs to be said and written about the positive image of the Church. The challenge for every active Catholic is to avoid the "should not" phrasing and, instead, speak about the "Good News." What are needed are enthusiasm and a strong sense of hope. We possess through baptism and all the other sacraments of the church great sources of power and grace to renew the face of the earth. We are hope-filled people who believe that Christ is the answer for all our needs and problems. If we do not have hope then we will not act

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<sup>23</sup> *The American Catholic People: Their Beliefs, Practices, and Values.* George Gallup, Jr., & Jim

to make a difference in our day to day existence. For those of us who have stayed with the Church during the turbulent decades of the 60's, 70's and 80's, there is now the task of welcoming the Generation X and the Millennium Christian to a vibrant faith community that is eager to integrate them in meaningful and rewarding membership roles.

## **Chapter Three**

### **Research Design and Methodology**

The primary research model for this project is a survey that was administered to a core group of St. Julie Billiart parishioners in the fall of 2002. Before that survey was developed in its final phase there were two focus groups that were conducted in the spring of the same year. From the input of the participants a series of questions and statements emerged that helped shape and identify critical questions for the survey. This chapter will have several sections that will detail the process of obtaining the core questions for the survey, the methods of analysis for the survey and some basic generalizations that emerged from the study.

This is an exploratory study about the returning inactive Catholic to active membership in the church. The locus or site for the study is St. Julie Billiart Parish, established in 1978 in North Ridgeville, Ohio. The territorial boundaries of this parish are rather small, approximately three square miles of the northeast section of the city, which is twenty-five square miles. The other Catholic parish is St. Peter the Apostle, which is well established for the past 125 years, has a large parochial school, and a population of more than 1500 families. St. Julie Billiart has 520 families registered but that figure would include single adults, single parents, widows and widowers. There are approximately 250-300 active families that attend Mass on a regular basis. An interesting fact is that half of the active families live outside the parish boundaries, and that makes St. Julie Billiart parish a church of choice. This reality is one of the primary factors that led to this study. Because of the constant flow of parishioners moving in and out of the parish there was

always the concern and desire to investigate the basic rationale for this influx and outflow. Before describing the three parts of this chapter that deal with the formation of the survey, the response, and some analysis, it is first necessary to establish the foundations of the study.

### **Background and History**

What was briefly described about St. Julie Billiart Parish in the beginning years is still valid some 25 years later. There is the constant movement in and out of the parish that makes it difficult at times to establish continuity with basic parish programs such as the parish school of religion, youth ministry and lector and commentator schedules. An average stay for a family in the parish was two to four years at the most. This variable was due to the fact that North Ridgeville is basically a bedroom community. The people move frequently in this area and because of that do not feel part of the community. Many of them are moving up on the social-economic scale which means that North Ridgeville is just a temporary stopover for another move to a bigger house or a better job. It is a small city of 24,000 inhabitants on the edge of the large metropolitan area of Cleveland. It has easy access to Cleveland and all the suburbs because of its proximity to freeways and the Ohio turnpike. It is less than 15 minutes to the airport. All these factors make the city very attractive to out of town buyers, families, and salesmen in particular; many of who regularly travel by plane to their customers.

In the early years of the parish the movement was accentuated by the fact that North Ridgeville was one of the fastest growing suburbs in Ohio. Although the population

increased over the years by about four thousand new residents this did not significantly affect the parish membership. Many of the new parishioners came from surrounding cities and did not move into North Ridgeville. This is still the situation at the present time. Because there is very little land for development in the parish (only twelve homes have been built within the boundaries in the last ten years) the new parishioners are people who have bought older homes or have registered from outside the parish. The families who register now at St. Julie Billiart have been searching for a parish that meets their specific needs. The parish has become a church of choice for these newcomers. Because of this factor many of them are returning from an inactive practice of their faith with the desire to return to full communion with the Church.<sup>1</sup>

When the opportunity arose to work on this project as part of a doctrinal studies program the author started to gather data about what parishioners thought about the parish, its programs, its outreach to the community, and the different ways one could be active. A parish survey taken at all the weekend Masses in February 1997 did provide some directions for the questions that were used for the focus groups in 2002. The survey asked parishioners to list the positive and negative aspects of the parish. While this was not a statistical way to gather measurable data it did provide a great deal of descriptive material.<sup>2</sup> One reoccurring theme did emerge from the survey that supports data from the current analysis. The 1997 survey responses repeated the need to provide an atmosphere of acceptance and hospitality to newcomers as well as the regular parishioners. This was a very important factor in the structuring of the explorative survey about attitudes that

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<sup>1</sup> See the appendix for a short history of St. Julie Billiart Parish.

<sup>2</sup> See the appendix for a copy of the February 2, 1997 survey. One feature is the appreciation for hospitality.

parishioners shared about their parish. As the founding pastor of St. Julie Billiart parish in 1978, the author has the unique position of viewing over twenty-five years, the movement in and out of the parish. He has registered, with few exceptions, every new family and because of this, has known almost all of the parishioners by name. There is closeness in this parish that is special. This does not mean that other parishes do not have the same feeling. It appears that because of its small size, limited territory, and the fact that most of the families had made a deliberate choice to attend, there is a special bond of support and collegiality among the parishioners. Having experienced the many transitions of parish growth and membership the author believes that his research and analysis will be helpful to the pastoral staffs of this new millennium.

The Catholic Church in the United States needs to reach out more than ever before to the faithful and the returning inactive Catholic because of the scandals and mismanagement among its leadership. A positive approach filled with hope and reconciliation will be more attractive than seeking excuses to blame or criticize. This is the approach that the author has taken as pastor when he welcomes new families into the community. Instead of criticizing or blaming them for being inactive he lets them know that he is very pleased to welcome them into the parish. From his experience of almost twenty-five years he knows that many inactive members are returning with a lot of misdirected guilt, anger and confusion. A gentle approach that offers reconciliation and hope goes a long way to begin the process of healing and renewal.

Many of the returning inactive Catholics volunteer reasons why they left the church and why they are returning. So many are still dealing with misdirected guilt, anger and confusion. When they are accepted with open arms and hearts they can begin the

journey back to reconciliation and renewal. In the next section that deals with the pretesting and administration of the focus groups the basic hypothesis is that the returning inactive Catholics today do not return for the same reasons and to the same parish as was expected twenty five years ago. They have a different agenda that reflects the general attitudes of the average American Catholic of the postmodern era. To implement these focus groups parishioners were selected who were relatively new to the parish and many of them lived outside the parish boundaries. The sessions were conducted in the rectory, with a secretary present, who taped the sessions as well as took notes. These were very valuable for the evaluations of the sessions.

### **Pretesting and Administering Focus Groups**

#### **1. Pretesting of Hypothesis... Inactive Catholics are returning with specific agendas to active membership in a parish**

The preparations for the pretesting and administering a series of core questions to a select group of parishioners was critical for the design of the self administered parish survey. From the data gathered over the past ten years (1990-2000) from interviews with new parishioners, it became very evident that the old reasons to join a parish were no longer operative. Even in the years following the conclusion of the Second Vatican Council it was still expected that a family residing within the parish boundaries would automatically join that parish. This procedure gradually changed in the 80's and 90's to such a degree that now in the new millennium it is generally accepted that everybody has the right to choose his or her parish regardless of where they are living. Because of this



reoccurring phenomenon it is important to listen carefully to what the returning inactive Catholic is saying about the church. Not only is this important to research but also it is critical from a pastoral approach to know what exactly are the needs as well as the wants of the returning inactive parishioner.

The age group that is targeted in this study is the young married adult between the ages of twenty-five and forty-five. This individual has a different perspective of parish life, sacraments, morality and authority than his or her counterpart from the nineteen sixties. The parish is viewed by many as a temporary safe haven of community and ministry until something better is offered or perceived as more acceptable. With this background data a series of questions was developed to determine the basic spiritual and social needs of the returning Catholic. These primary exploratory questions would provide important information about needs and even the wants of the returning Catholic. To a large degree the following questions were the basis for formulating the core questions for the focus groups, the interviews of the pastors from the neighboring parishes, and interviews with six participants in the October 2002 survey.

- ❶ Is there a special need in your family at this time for spiritual growth?
- ❷ Have you been invited by a friend to attend Church?
- ❸ How did you hear about this parish?
- ❹ If there are school age children, do they need special instructions?
- ❺ Do you have any special sacramental needs?
- ❻ Is there a crisis in the family, such as sickness or death?
- ❼ Have you attended Mass here and found it meaningful?
- ❽ Are there any special qualities or characteristics in this parish that appeal to you?

- ❶ How do you think this parish will nourish you spiritually?
- ❷ How do you see yourself becoming an active member here?
- ❸ Why do you believe that your family can develop a stronger faith in this parish?

These questions were then used as a matrix to focus on the primary needs of the returning Catholic. There are strong indications from these questions that five areas need to be explored. These are community, sacramental, spiritual, educational, and ministry roles. To implement these needs there should be present the operating principles of hospitality, ministry training and an evolving ecclesiology. The first chapter described the different forms of ecclesiology that are operative in the twenty-first century Church. Whatever theology is formulated by the pastoral team it should always be guided by the principles enunciated in the decrees of the Second Vatican Council. In preparing the first focus group there were some assumptions based upon the research of literature from the last quarter of the twentieth century that listed reasons why the inactive Catholic was returning. Also, the author's own observations as pastor in interviewing hundreds of families in the past twenty five years has made him very aware of many sensitive and deeply emotional difficulties that still plague the returning parishioner.

The first focus group was selected to pretest the hypothesis that the inactive Catholics are returning to active membership in the parish with specific agendas. The primary research question asked if these returnees are looking essentially for a faith community. Four men and two women were selected for this session. The meeting was held at the parish rectory at 1:00 p.m. for an hour and fifteen minutes on Sunday, March 10, 2002. There were several factors that were used in the selection process. They were married and between thirty and forty-five years old. They were relatively unknown to each

other. Finally, they were in the parish from four months to ten years. In the brief opening remarks they were thanked for coming and were assured of the confidentiality of the session. They were told that this was a gathering of information, and that it was to be relaxing and enjoyable. The following is a brief resume of the six participants.

1. Agnes...ten years in parish, purchasing director for Methodist Village, age 45
2. Dagny...four months in parish, stay at home mom, age 30
3. Sharon...four years in parish, hair stylist, age 31
4. Georgia...six months in parish, dietician, age 30
5. Craig...eighteen months in parish, broadcast manager for WEOL, age 48
6. Matt...four years in parish, self-employed computer programmer, age 32
7. Rich...five months in parish, accountant, age 34
8. Mike...nine months in parish, estimator, age 30

One variable that was striking among these participants was that everybody except Agnes chose to belong to the parish after they had visited other churches in the area. They were not told about the hypothesis at the beginning of the session in order to assure that they would not feel obligated to shape all their responses to it. A series of ten questions was proposed that would surface reasons that motivate a returning Catholic.

1. List one reason why an inactive Catholic would return to the church at this time.
2. Is an inactive Catholic one who has been missing Mass almost all the time in the past five years?
3. Has anybody confided in you recently why he or she has returned to the church?

4. Name one feature in this parish that would attract new parishioners.
5. Would the liturgy, i.e., celebration of Sunday Mass, attract membership?
6. Would you consider the environment, i.e., physical location and grounds, attractive?
7. Is hospitality a prime factor for new members?
8. Is a strong youth program important for membership?
9. Is a solid religious education program important for the children?
10. What is the most important reason to belong to a parish?

In response to the **first question**, three of the eight participants said that religious education of children was a primary reason. The others listed the following... seeking peace, resolution of a problem, a healing, example of partner, changing priorities. The **second question** about identifying an inactive Catholic elicited many responses. Since everybody had a different idea about defining an inactive Catholic, a probe question was introduced to define an inactive Catholic. All agreed that missing Mass in itself did not define inactivity. Shut-ins miss Mass, for many serious reasons people miss Mass on a regular basis, but pray every day. Conscience was a big factor in resolving this factor. The discussion about the inactive Catholic could easily have been the subject of a focus group by itself. The ideas expressed here would be used later on in the next focus group that would be conducted on April 28, 2002. The **third question** asked if anybody confided in you recently why he or she has returned to church. It did not elicit any responses. Nobody said that they had this experience. A probe question was introduced: Is this a private matter that people just don't talk about? There was no agreement from the group. So the

questioning was not continued. The **fourth question** asked each participant to name one feature in the parish that would attract new parishioners. Everybody commented on the friendliness of the parish from the pastor to the parishioners that they first encountered in attending Mass here. With one exception all said that they had shopped for churches before they registered at St. Julie Billiart. The **fifth question** asked if the Liturgy, the way we celebrate Mass, attracted membership. All responses were very positive. Richard said, "The Mass combined the best of the old and the new--not so much the way it is run--but the way it is perceived; kind of modern--but still kind of comforting pattern that you find in the Catholic Church." Mike said, "You can feel the warmth during Mass that you don't get at other churches." Agnes liked the structure in the Mass. Georgia was surprised at the participation of the youth at Mass. She did not experience this at other churches. The **sixth question** focused on the environment, physical location and appearance of the church buildings. Again, the responses were favorable, ranging from remarks about the garden-like atmosphere of the parish property to the family and child-friendly interior of the church itself. The location of the church in the woods, a comfortable distance from the street, lends itself to a park-like atmosphere. The **seventh question** was the real probing question for this session because it asked if hospitality was a prime factor in attracting new members. All nodded their heads emphatically to this question. Sharon said that this is the primary reason for registering. Craig said that the church should be the most hospitable place and we have it here. A common statement was that they wanted to connect with people at the parish and they found it possible at St. Julie's. The **eighth question** asked if a strong youth program is important for membership. The responses of the group were very surprising in the sense that they had very favorable comments about the involvement

of the youth in the parish, at Mass, youth programs, trips, peer modeling, and teaching in the PSR classes. The **ninth question** asked if a solid religious education program for the children was very important. Since this parish does not have a private school the answers were biased towards the PSR program. All the parents have children in our PSR classes on Sunday mornings. Sharon's comments were most interesting; "St. Julie has more advantages since it doesn't have a private school attached to it. When I went to PSR there were no teen groups. This parish can offer many more activities to the PSR students." The **tenth question** asked what is the most important reason to belong to a parish. A very good comment was that all the other nine reasons are part of the answer. Richard said, "It is like a wicker basket with all its interlinking weaves. All the parts make up the whole and each one contributes to its unity." Some key words and phrases that came from this question are: belonging, commitment, connecting, all above components are important, support system, relationships, sense of connection.

From the data received from this focus group there emerged some dominant factors that influence active membership.

1. A family with children seeks a parish primarily for religious education.
2. A couple without children seeks membership for very personal reasons that usually means a rupture or minimal relationship with a parish in their youth.
3. From the sample of eight families surveyed, seven actively searched for a parish before making a commitment.
4. The main feature that attracts membership is a sense of community or family orientation.
5. Once committed to a chosen parish there is a need to connect with others.

From these statements another set of ten questions was prepared for the focus group that met at the parish rectory on April 28, 2002. The hypothesis for the first focus group was to discover the primary reason that would encourage most inactive Catholics to return to active membership in a contemporary Catholic parish. The writer had the sense from this first meeting that there is a desire to return to a spirituality that was begun in the early formative years of childhood but was lost or damaged by the radical changes and currents in Catholicism in the post Vatican II years. The emphasis on community and connection can be interpreted in the spiritual sense of the desire to belong to a faith community, nourished by the Eucharist and the Word of God. The contemporary Catholic parish needs to fulfill this need if it is to be faithful to the mission of Jesus.

## **2. Development and testing of April 28, 2002 Focus Group**

**Hypothesis...**the returning inactive Catholic seeks a faith community that will provide a strong spiritual foundation.

This second focus group of nine parishioners met at the parish rectory on April 28, 2002 to verify the conclusions from the first focus group that had pretested the hypothesis. The data received from that first group surfaced many reasons that motivate a returning inactive Catholic. What was that specific reason that was motivating the majority of these people? This question prompted in the second focus session the hypothesis that the returning inactive Catholic is seeking a faith community that will provide a strong

spiritual foundation. There are nine questions that were listed as basic motivations for the returning inactive Catholic.

1. In seeking a new parish what are one or two dominant features that it must have?
2. How important is an invitation from a friend or neighbor to join a parish?
3. Do you believe it is necessary to check out other churches before joining one?
4. Would dissatisfaction with a previous parish be the main reason to join a new parish?
5. Does the size of the parish membership limit your choices of parishes?
6. Do you have a strong need for spiritual growth in your parish involvement?
7. Does membership in a parish necessarily mean an active ministry for you?
8. How would you share with others the good news about your active parish?

There were six men and three women, all married and parishioners from fifteen years to nine months in the parish. The following is a short profile of the participants.

Jim- 60 years old, five children, four years in parish, active member, banking

Dagny- 32 years old, three children, homemaker, nine months in parish, no ministry

Steve- 52 years old, no children, machinist, very active in parish, nine years in parish

Susan- 37 years old, one girl, writer, attends Mass, no ministry, two years in parish

Tim- 41 years old, three children, fifteen years in parish, active, horticulturist

Keith- 37 years old, one son, five years in parish, civil engineer, attends Mass, usher

Bernadette- 37 years old, one stepson, five years in parish, teacher and lawyer, active

Manuel-33 years old, five years in parish, not active, mortgage broker

Felix- 56 years old retired policeman, two years in parish, sacristan at church



After the brief welcoming and the introduction of the recording secretary the participants were told that the session was designed to seek information about the returning inactive Catholic. In response to the **first question**, which asked for a few dominant features that would attract membership, the participants were most helpful. They mention these factors as very important: meaningful homilies, comfort zone, feeling welcome, and a pastor that was visible after Masses on Sunday. The **second question**, how important is an invitation from a friend or neighbor to join a parish, was answered best by Steve who said, "an invitation is very powerful and meaningful." Another comment was very interesting- Keith said, "I was invited by a neighbor because I didn't know about the parish until he told me. It is important to get the word out." The **third question** focused on the current practice of **checking** out churches before joining one. Dagny's remarks were very incisive. She said, "it is important to shop around to find a comfortable place so you don't feel like you are 'checking the box.' If you are coming back to church you need to find your niche. You went away from the church for a reason and you don't want to find a church with those similarities." The **fourth question**, Would dissatisfaction with a previous parish be the main reason for joining a new parish? elicited almost a unanimous response. The group all said that if you were upset and not nourished spiritually you should change parishes. The **fifth question** about the size of the parish elicited many comments about the vibrancy of the parish life. If one is comfortable with the parish, the size is not a determining factor. The **sixth question** asked if parish involvement included a strong need for spiritual growth. Several responded by saying not just growth, but maintenance and support is needed. This is especially true for parents

who want direction from the church to guide their children's faith life. The **seventh question** probed the possible correlation between membership and active ministry. The meaning of active in the church took different approaches. One person said that Mass attendance was sufficient. Another felt being involved in other parish functions was being active. Active membership doesn't mean that one has to be visible at all times. Just talking with people and promoting the parish are ways of being active. The **eighth question** asked the definition of an active parishioner. Some remarks that are worth mentioning are: you don't have to be a committee member, just show your support by attending various functions, one that volunteers and does promote the parish is active, one who has an active faith life, just to make one commitment is good. The **ninth question** probed for methods of sharing the good news about an active parish. Most participants agreed that the best means is in general conversation with friends. A positive experience is always to talk about it with others.

The consensus of this focus group was that a welcoming comfort zone is important in a parish. It helps to be asked to join a church. Most felt it was a good idea to check out other churches. Freelancing is a good term to describe this activity. People want a place where it is comfortable. They do not want to go back to a parish that had problems they didn't like before. Mary will stick with a parish through good and bad times.

Although there may be some competition between parishes, the size of membership doesn't make a big difference. So much depends on the personality of the pastor and staff. Newcomers are looking not so much for spiritual growth as for maintenance and support. One can be active by being just silent and visible. Do not have to be on every committee. Talking about your parish comes naturally.

This was a very good focus group. No one person was dominant. All contributed to the input. Some key phrases keep reoccurring that were very helpful for the formulating of the survey. They are: welcoming, freelancing, comfort zone, active not yet necessarily involved openly, support and maintenance, church as family. The input from the two focus groups provided valuable insights that led to a formulation of the parish survey. The following section of this chapter will describe the survey instrument, its development and some preliminary conclusions.<sup>3</sup>

### **Self-Administered Survey... Its composition and testing**

There are two factors that underline this entire project. The first is to determine the basic reasons why an inactive Catholic would return to active membership. The second is to identify those factors that would keep this individual active once he or she has made a commitment to be recognized as a parishioner. The author has maintained that these two factors must be recognized as almost two perspectives or views of the same reality. Whether the inactive Catholic is approaching the parish for the first time or he or she is actually a member, the same needs or wants that have been expressed in focus groups or surveys are still operative. In preparing the survey the primary goal was to invite those members of the parish that would fit the profile of the returning inactive Catholic. A list was prepared of parishioners who had registered in the last five years, married, and were between the ages of 20 and 40. Letters were sent to 120 parishioners inviting them to choose one of two dates in September 2002 so they could participate in filling out a

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<sup>3</sup> See appendix for summary of pre-test and April 28 2002 focus group.

questionnaire about Church attitudes. Sixty-four responded and completed the surveys on the two last Sundays in September.

There are four major categories that shaped the outline of the survey. They were introduced to identify variables that would facilitate reentry into the Catholic parish with hope and support. These categories identified previous faith background, current spiritual needs, identification with the updated Catholic parish, and faith and ministry development. The questionnaire is divided into six sections with questions that are both qualitative and quantitative. There are some questions that use the Likert scale of measurement. Section four of the survey has twelve statements about attitudes toward the Catholic Church that requires open-ended statements. The second section of the survey allowed the respondent to reveal attitudes and feelings since it asked for three to five reasons why people stay connected to the church and what would cause a parishioner to change parishes. The responses demonstrated some very clear support of the church in spite of internal difficulties.

The design of the survey was guided by the primary aim of the project; namely, identify the needs of the returning Catholic. Those needs are community, sacraments, spiritual growth, education, and ministry roles. The secondary aim of the project is to identify factors that would keep the returnee in community. The focus groups identified them as hospitality, ministry training, and a renewed ecclesiology.

The primary purpose of the self-administered survey was to gather basic information about attitudes and feelings about the contemporary Catholic Church. To facilitate this it was important to survey a cross section of parishioners that would fit the profile of the generation X or postmodern Christian. Although these terms were never

used openly to identify the 64 surveyed parishioners it was apparent from their age and past religious experiences that they could be identified in that category.

There are six sections in the survey that incorporate Likert scale responses; open and closed ended statements, qualitative statements, and quantitative responses. The **first** section used the Likert scale- strongly agree, agree, disagree, and strongly disagree- to discover reasons why adults (20-40) are returning to active membership in the Catholic Church. It is divided into four parts: atmosphere of worship, quality of worship, spiritual and personal needs, and sacramental needs.

Atmosphere of worship had five statements that graded the friendliness of the church's pastor and membership. The statements from the first section are:

- 1) The pastor is friendly and welcoming.
- 2) The ministers at Mass are friendly.
- 3) The grounds and buildings of the parish are appealing.
- 4) People reach out to welcome strangers at Mass.
- 5) Talking in church is acceptable.

The replies to five statements all rated very high on strongly agree, averaging from 67.2 % to 42.2 %. The one major disagreement was on the issue of talking in Church. Thirty-three of the sixty-four participants, or 67.2%, agreed or strongly agreed. However twenty others, or 31.3%, disagreed or strongly disagreed. This discrepancy will be analyzed further in the next chapter when bivariate correlation between two age groups, i.e., 20-39 and 40-45 will be introduced if necessary. It appears that the younger age group, when compared to the older one, would be more open to talking in church.

The **second** part on quality of worship was designed to probe the respondents' feelings about Mass. The statements are:

1. Sunday Masses meet my spiritual needs.
2. Sermons are well delivered.
3. Music is well suited for worship.
4. Congregation participates.
5. Time of Mass meets my schedule.
6. There are many and varied prayer opportunities for personal devotion in the parish.

The cumulative percent response to these sections was very high. A positive response ranged from 89.1% to 98.4 % of the sixty-four respondents. The highest rank was on the congregation participation, which was a pleasant surprise for the author since he personally felt that congregation participation was just fair to average.

The **third** part had four statements about spiritual and personal needs.

- 1) A crisis of faith has led me back to the Church.
- 2) A serious illness or death (in the family) has led me back to the Church.
- 3) I have a desire for a deeper relationship with Christ.
- 4) I need to receive the sacraments more often.

Contrary to what was expected by the author the responses to the first two statements indicated that those variables were not operable for a returning Catholic. Fifty-four of the sixty-four did not have a crisis of faith. Fifty-six of the sixty-four did not use a sickness or death in the family as a reason for returning.

The **fourth** and final part explored the sacramental needs of the returning Catholic since the focus groups did indicate that this was a high motivation especially if

there are young children involved. The seven statements asked for responses based upon six sacramental needs, excluding Holy Orders. An interesting data that emerged from the statement about the need to have the marriage blessed in the church was the large number that agreed: sixteen or 17.2%.

The **second** section of the survey was very important because it asked for open-ended responses to two critical questions: Why do people stay connected to the Church? What would cause you to leave this parish for another? The responses to the first question were coded into thirteen different responses. Those responses are listed in the appendix under data codebook.<sup>4</sup> There were sixteen coded responses for reasons to leave the Church. The highest rank for the first statement was the maintenance and deepening of relationship with God. The second most mentioned reason was community involvement. The second statement that asked for situations motivating a change to another parish produced these four reasons: change in pastor, relocation out of area, members not friendly or welcoming, and poor education programs.

Section **three** of the survey used the Likert scale for the ten statements that probed the intensity or strength of convictions to join a parish. They are: searching for a friendly faith community; checking out other parishes before joining; friendliness of the pastor and staff; opportunities to participate in the parish programs; a strong youth program; a solid educational program for children; worship (Mass and Sacraments) are well prepared; well prepared sermons that relate to their life. A very clear response that should be noted by all parish staffs is that sixty-one out of sixty-four parishioners said that

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<sup>4</sup> See Appendix for listings in the Church attitudes data codebook.

they had checked out other parishes before registering. With one exception everybody said that the friendliness of the pastor and staff is important.

The **fourth** section deals with attitudes toward the Catholic Church. The twelve statements first asked for a simple yes or no response. Then an open-ended probe question- **why is that?** - was inserted. It was explained to all the participants that a simple sentence or two was sufficient for this response. The twelve statements are:

1. In view of the current crisis in the Church concerning clergy and sexual abuse would you consider this a reason for dropping out from active membership in the parish.
2. I feel the church services give me inspiration to live up to my best during the week.
3. I believe in a formal religion but I seldom go to church.
4. I believe that active church membership is essential for witnessing my faith in God.
5. I do not fully understand the dogmas or truths of the church.
6. I feel that my church attendance is a fair index of support to the parish.
7. I feel that I can worship God better out of door than in the church.
8. I enjoy my church because there is a spirit of friendliness there.
9. My parish reaches out to me.
10. I believe that the church is the greatest influence for good government and right living.
11. I like the ceremonies of my church but do not miss them much when I am away.
12. I like to go to church to develop my faith and strengthen my community.

What was encouraging in this section was the very affirming response to the first statement. Fifty-five out of the sixty-four respondents said they would stay in the church despite the current crises.



The **fifth** section listed reasons for joining a parish. A numerical scale of one to five indicated least important to most important. The ten statements were a rewording of previous statements from the previous sections. The statements are:

1. Quality of pastoral care and concern provided by parish priest.
2. Friendliness and/or concern among parishioners.
3. Style of worship that is typical of the parish.
4. Quality of preaching at Mass.
5. My friends belong to this parish.
6. Atmosphere of the church itself.
7. Opportunities for parishioners to participate in community service.
8. Opportunities to get my children involved in the parish youth programs and/or educational programs.
9. Involvement of the parish in the local community.
10. Opportunities for becoming a lay leader.

The most positive response was to the first statement that asked how important was the quality of pastoral care by the pastor. Fifty-six said that it is very important. On the other end of the spectrum only eighteen said it was important to be a lay leader in the congregation.

The **sixth** and final section of the survey identifies the spiritual journey of the respondent. Everybody had to check the number of sacraments received, tell how often he or she attended Sunday Mass, indicate how long he or she has been a registered member of the parish, give marital status, age, and gender, and finally, indicate level of active

participation in the parish. They also checked the ages of their children and what sacraments the children still needed.

A significant number, fifty-six of the total, attend weekly Mass. Thirty-seven were members for less than five years. Thirty-five, over one-half, do not serve on any committees. There are twenty-three males and forty-one females. Thirty-seven of the respondents are under the age of thirty-five. Of the sixty-four participants fifty-eight are married, four are single and two are divorced. They have thirty-five children under the age of two and eleven children between three and four. This group appears to be a good cross section of the parish. Further analysis will attempt to bring out some differences in the two age groups when compared to some selected variables of the survey if it is necessary.

### **Individual Interviews**

At the conclusion of the survey each participant was given the opportunity to give an enrichment of his or her responses by participating in a personal interview. Three men and women were selected from a list of twenty that said they would be willing to be interviewed. The author met each of them for about twenty minutes in the first week of January 2003. Their responses were very honest and reinforced the data that has been developed from the survey. The author is including a short resume of each person's interview in order to enrich the responses from the survey. Their answers to a few questions about membership and reasons for joining the parish do reinforce the data that will be analyzed more fully in the next chapter.

Richard, age 34, married with one child, has been active in the parish for sixteen months. His concept of being active meant regular Mass attendance and participation in

some parish activities such as Finance Council and sacristan. He gave three reasons based upon his own experience and reflection why people are presently joining the Catholic Church. The first one is a child who needs to be baptized and be given a good moral foundation. Since he had a strong Catholic foundation he perceives it to be very logical to offer that to his child. A personal spiritual development is found in the Church. It is a part or component of the process of spiritual growth. Community is the third reason to join. He said that you do not find it in the neighborhood anymore. One factor is the high mobility of the modern family.

Eric, age 36, married with one child, and a member for seven months. He considers being active by attending Church and contributing regularly. He personally does not see many of his friends from Catholic grade school attending Mass anymore. But he comes from a very large family of eight siblings who are very close and family oriented. He sees four reasons for returning to the church. There is a focus on all ages in the parish. There is community involvement outside the parish. He likes a return to simplicity (overtones of traditionalism were present during this reflection). He said that he and his friends are not attracted to the "church of the ever-banging tambourines." A final reason was the need to return to the Sacraments.

John, age 41, married with two children, and two years a member of the parish. He considered himself active because of his church attendance and his involvement outside Mass such as retreats, and parish social events. He listed five reasons for returning to church. The fear and anxiety so prevalent in our world can be overcome by the spiritual nourishment that only the Church can provide. Those who were once active and had the seed of faith now need their faith to be restored. Many want their children to have God in

their lives. People are seeking community and are shopping for a church. They want a comfort zone. Finally many are searching for an open and non-judgmental community. John identified this group as the returnees who are not married as well as the single parent.

Sue, age 38, married with one child, has been a member for three years. She considers being active as more than just going to Sunday Mass. There must be more than that. She participates in community service projects sponsored by the parish. She likes the short-term commitments, with many choices because they fit her time schedule. She supports the mission of the Church. She, too, offered seven reasons for returning to the Church: 1) people are missing something in their lives, search for it in different areas, haven't found it, and now believe that they can find it in the Church; 2) she identified the church as a place of peace and support in time of crises as well in good times; 3) the needs of the children; 4) envisions the church as the connection with God; 5) take the faith and incorporate it into everyday life, thereby having a deeper understanding; 6) community- to meet people who share the same values and faith; 7) the need for acceptance.

Georgia, age 31, married and expecting first child, has been a member for 16 months. She is active by attending Sunday Mass, participates in parish programs, and when convenient to her time schedule assists in the social outreach ministry. She listed seven reasons for returning to the Church: concern for world issues, especially since 9/11/01; a need to return to God in this crisis situation; obligation to raise children; return to the sacraments. The fourth response was unique since nobody else mentioned it in the survey or in the interviews: peer pressure from a spouse or another family member to attend; She said that seeing others attending could influence and encourage a return to church. The next three responses stressed the sense of peace and enrichment, spiritual

growth, and the need to have community with shared values and personal involvement. Georgia ended her interview with the statement-“ I must do more as a Catholic besides attending weekly Mass; I must live my faith instead of just talking about it.”

Kim, age 34, married with two children and a member for one year. She is not as active as she wants to be but she tries to attend Mass. She probably said this because she has two small children who take up a lot of her time. She listed four personal reasons for returning. Her age group is getting more involved with the church because of their children. Priorities are different now with a family. The world scene is entirely different from her childhood with more fear and terrorism. She needs to be part of a church community where she is around like-minded people with the same values. She seeks a friendly welcoming community.

These six interviews were very helpful for the enrichment of the survey that was administered four months earlier. The initial conclusions of these interviews did validate the conclusions of the hypothesis that newly registered parishioners are seeking spirituality and community. A further analysis of the interview data will help the formulation of pastoral initiatives to welcome with more understanding and support the returning inactive Catholic. The first person usually to welcome officially a new parishioner is the pastor. How he receives this person and makes him or her comfortable even in the first few minutes is important. As the author was researching material for this project he noticed a definite dearth of information about the process of registering a new parishioner. What did the pastor say and how open was he when he knew that the new parishioner had ulterior motives for registering? This project is located in a geographical area where four parishes are within ten minutes driving time of each other. The logical step would be to interview

the other three pastors of the parishes adjacent to St. Julie Billiard and to ask them why they think people are registering at the present time.

The interviews with these pastors took place in their rectories in December 2002. They were most cooperative in making time for the author who spent about thirty minutes with each of them.

Father Tom, age 54, ordained 27 years, is the pastor for the past two and a half years of St. Mary Parish in Avon with 700 families. It is both suburban and rural, but with a rapidly growing population that is fueled by major home construction. The families that are moving into the area are younger, average age in the mid-thirties. They are looking for a more traditional church setting. There were fifty baptisms in 2002 and sixty registrations that same year. Most have lived in the area for a year before they register and have their children baptized. Some want to be active. The majority of the recently registered parishioners have been active in their previous parish. However the younger couples haven't been very active. They certainly do check out the church and the schools when searching for a home in the city. The pastor said that he tries to do most of the registrations. It was clear from the time spent with Tom that he enjoyed being a pastor and wanted to make his newly registered parishioners feel comfortable in the parish.

Fr. Tom, age 65, pastor for 22 years of St. Peter in N. Ridgeville. He has a very large parish of over 1800 families and a school. The parish is suburban, middle class, and quickly going from a quiet rural country setting to a very fast growing mid-size city. When asked why people are joining the parish Tom said that they want something from the church. Usually for the young couples there is a baptism or perhaps a marriage to be performed. Many have lived in the parish for three to four years before they register. The

older folks moving in still hold on to their old parishes and eventually will join St. Peter's. Tom said that many do have an ulterior motive. When asked if these people want to be active he replied "not particularly." They need to be invited. A majority do admit that they haven't been active or going to church. Even though they have kids in school they may not get involved. He tries to register each family himself.

Fr. Jack, age 51, ordained 24 years, has been pastor of Holy Trinity, Avon for five years. The parish has 1200 families and a school in a suburban area that is quickly losing its rural or farm setting. He is personally registering at least 100 families every year. They are in their early thirties and are moving in from the city of Cleveland. There are many from the West Side of Cleveland and many outsiders from New England. There is a day school with 311 students and weekly religion classes for 211 students from the public schools. The majority of new parishioners have also visited other parishes in the area. They like his parish because of the traditional look of the church. It reminds them of the parishes where they lived as children. The agenda that they bring is family, unity, baptism, and marriage. They feel welcomed here. The older families in the parish have a welcoming committee.

All three pastors agreed on several points... people check out other parishes before registering, many of the young couples were inactive in previous parishes, and spiritual needs especially for their children is a key issue for reentry into the Church. Although all three admitted that many register only when they need a sacrament administered from the pastor, they still were pleased to welcome them as parishioners. There is a totally different attitude taken today by the modern pastor as opposed to the pre-Vatican II approach. Then it was a very impersonal and perfunctory procedure since it

was expected that all Catholic families must be members of the parish within whose territory they lived. Today's high mobility and greater awareness of personal choices have necessitated more creative approaches to welcome inactive members.

What are those specific concerns that the returning Catholic has when approaching the church office? What is he or she looking for in the new parish? Why even return? And if one does make the commitment, what is there to keep the membership active? These are just some of the questions that will be considered in the next chapter of this project. The self-administered survey provided much data that will be analyzed and then cast into a pastoral mode for reflection and evaluation. Some specific statistical data together with bar charts of the more outstanding responses will be presented to validate the hypotheses that have motivated this study. It is the intention of the author that the data presented will be clearly identified, charted, and critically analyzed in such a way that the busy pastor and staff can easily read and identify areas of concern. This project from the very beginning was intended to be pastorally oriented, practical and very readable. And so in the following chapter the author will present the analysis of the data collected for the project. The chapter will take the reader through a descriptive narrative of the methodology used in the study with the appropriate tables and charts that display the findings. Any expected and unexpected outcomes from the study also will be identified and discussed.



## **Chapter Four**

### **Descriptive Narration and Analysis of the Survey**

#### **Part One: Profile of the Respondents to the Survey**

In every parish there is the traditional division of membership by thirds. That is, one-third attend Mass regularly every Sunday, one-third occasionally, and the last third perhaps on Christmas and Easter. This means in terms of support for the mission of the parish that only one third of the parishioners will use the envelopes and take an active role in parish programs. In St. Julie Billiart Parish there are about 250 to 300 families that can be considered active out of 500 families. When the author was defining the parameters for the test families of the survey, he researched the parish census files for information. He listed parishioners who were registered less than five years in the parish, were not very active, married, and lived inside as well as outside the parish boundaries. Invitations were sent to 120 parishioners inviting them to one of two sessions on a Sunday afternoon in September 2002. Sixty-four responded to the invitation. The following tables indicate the marital status, age, and gender of the group and length of stay in parish.

**Table 1 Marital Status**

<b>Status</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Married	53	82.8
Single	4	6.3
Divorced	2	3.1
Remarried	5	7.8
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100</b>

Although it was not the purpose of the survey to identify precisely the marriage status of the men and women who participated, it was interesting to note that seven out of

sixty-four were divorced or remarried. This meant 10.5% of the respondents were in this category.

**Table 2 Ages of Respondents**

<b>Ages</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
20-25	6	9
26-30	11	17
31-35	20	31
36-40	16	25
41-45	9	14
46-over	2	3
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100</b>

Thirty-seven are under the age of 35 and 25 are between the ages of 35 and 45. Two respondents are over 46 years old. Almost 58% of the respondents are under 35. This is a good mix for the ages of the respondents.

**Table 3 Gender of Respondents**

<b>Gender</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percent</b>
Male	23	35.9
Female	41	64.1
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100</b>

Although there was no attempt to divide equally the numbers by gender the end result was that 23 men took the survey. Forty-one women also took the survey. The primary motive in this study was to profile the emerging religious values and to identify the needs as well as the perceived wants of the returning inactive Catholic parishioner. In the second section of this chapter the religious values of the respondents will be presented for discussion and analysis. The first section of the survey asked for reasons why adults (20-40) are returning to active membership in the Church. The first category asked for

input on the importance of the pastor, and about talking in church. The first chart shows significant agreement about the pastor's attitude.

**Table 4 Length of Time in Parish**

Length in Parish	Frequency	Percent
1-6 months	10	16
6-12 months	6	9
1-2 years	21	33
3-5 years	10	16
5 years or more	17	26
<b>Total</b>	<b>64</b>	<b>100</b>

It is significant that 58% of the men and women who took the survey were in the parish for no more than two years. Twenty-five percent were in the parish less than a year. According to parish records the average stay in the parish is between three and four years. Those who took the survey and indicated that they have been in the parish for over five years can be considered the more permanent part of the parish and also in the age bracket of 36 and older. In the first fifteen years of the parish history (1978-1993) the average length of residence for a parishioner was just three years. Since the slow down in the economy and other economic factors that impact upon the residents in North East Ohio, there has been a noticeable turndown in registrations. More families are staying longer in the parish especially in the past three years because of the uncertainty in the job markets.

### **Part Two: Spiritual Needs of the Respondent**

Table five lists reasons why adults are returning to active membership based upon their spiritual needs and perception of the congregation and pastor's attitudes. It is

significant that 97% agreed on the importance of the friendliness of the pastor. What was also significant is that 32% said that talking in church was not acceptable.

**Table 5 Why Adults are Returning to Active Membership**

<b>A. ATMOSPHERE OF WORSHIP</b>		
<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage of agreement</b>
1. Friendliness of Pastor	62	97
2. Friendliness of Liturgical Ministers	64	100
3. Appeal of grounds and church building	64	100
4. Friendliness of community	59	92
5. Talking in church is acceptable	43	68
<b>B. QUALITY OF WORSHIP</b>		
1. Sunday Mass meets my spiritual needs	57	89
2. Sermons are well delivered	62	97
3. Music is well suited for worship	57	89
4. Congregation participates	63	98
5. Mass times are well scheduled	57	89
6. Ample prayer opportunities in parish	58	90
<b>C. SPIRITUAL AND PERSONAL NEEDS</b>		
1. Crisis of faith has led me back to church	10	11
2. Serious illness or death in family has led me back to the Church	8	13
3. I have a desire for a deeper relationship with Christ	63	99
4. I need to receive the Sacraments	39	71

D. SACRAMENTAL NEEDS, continued		
Variable	Frequency	Percentage of Agreement
1. A family member needs baptism	10	6
2. My child needs preparation for First Holy Communion	17	18
3. A family member wants to get married at our church	6	10
4. My marriage needs to be blessed in the Church	16	25
5. A family member needs reconciliation	23	36
6. There is a need to receive Confirmation	26	41
7. There is a need to receive the Sacrament of the Sick	14	22

This was one of the more outstanding outcomes of the survey. The respondents almost universally agreed that they desire their parish to possess the characteristics listed in Table 6.

Table 6

STATEMENTS ABOUT THE CHURCH		
Variable	Frequency	% of Agreement
1. Searching for a friendly faith community	63	98
2. Other parishes are checked out before joining	61	95
3. Friendliness of pastor and staff	63	98
4. Opportunities to participate in parish programs	64	100
5 A strong youth program is important	63	98
6.Solid educational program for children is essential	62	97
7. Mass and Sacraments are well prepared	62	97
8. Sermons are well prepared and relate to my life	63	98

They all agreed that it was very important for them to be given opportunities to participate. This coincides with the initial intention to be part of a sharing faith community. The fact that 61 families checked out other parishes before joining St. Julie Billiart should raise red flags that are waved vigorously before every pastoral staff. It is no longer a given that any Catholic parish will satisfy or even meet the needs of every Catholic. In these days of high-pressure advertising, media hype over the right image, and politically correct posturing, the parish is competing for the attention as well as the souls of the public. Returning inactive Catholics are definitely looking for welcoming faith communities, and sometimes that doesn't mean the Catholic Church.

Table seven states ten major reasons for joining a parish. Again it is significant that 87% or 56 respondents indicated that the number one reason for joining was the quality of pastoral care and concern provided by the parish priest. The second important reason was the quality of preaching at Mass. High quality preaching has always been a priority of the laity because they are accustomed to hearing professional speakers and commentators on television and radio. The well-educated and well-read Catholic rightly demands a homily that is well prepared and preached.

**Table 7 Reasons for Joining Parish**

<b>Variable</b>	<b>Frequency</b>	<b>Percentage</b>
1. Quality of pastoral care	56	87
2. Friendliness of parishioners	53	82
3. Style of worship typical of parish	52	81
4. Quality of preaching at Mass	54	84
5. My friends belong to this parish	15	24

Reasons for Joining the Parish, continued		
Variable	Frequency	Percentage
6. Atmosphere of the church itself	53	82
7. Opportunities for parishioners to participate in community service	41	66
8. Children can be active in parish youth and educational programs	51	79
9. Parish active in local community	42	66
10. Opportunity to become a lay leader in the church	18	28

A significant statistic from this table is that 28% of the respondents said that they have opportunities to become lay leaders in the parish. This presumes that the remaining 72% of the respondents do not perceive that the parish offers them the challenge of lay leadership. This factor could possibly be caused by a lack of communication between the pastoral staff and parishioners or a difference in the understanding of the concept of shared ministry. Many parishioners are involved in parish ministries but perhaps think that they do not have a voice in the decision process. This curious fact needs more attention when recruiting people to participate in the parish programs. It appears that many will volunteer only if they are somehow given more authority. Forty-one out of 64 respondents recognized opportunities to be involved at church and in the local community. The willingness of parishioners to be involved is truly a sign of hope for the understaffed clergy in the parish. What perhaps needs to be resolved through more training and motivational techniques is the awareness of the responsibility that every baptized Catholic is to share faith and ministry. Many parishioners will be active because they do feel needed and can

contribute to the spiritual and material growth of the parish. If they are properly supported by quality worship, preaching, respect and kindness from the staff and fellow parishioners, the opportunities for involvement on all levels in the parish will be there for the asking.

Twenty-four percent of the respondents said that their friends were in the parish. What impact this has for involvement in parish ministry is not certain. It seems that a social connection with fellow parishioners is not a high priority for membership. The tables in the first part of this chapter indicated that spiritual growth and a welcoming community are very important. Since length of stay in the parish for most of the respondents was less than two years this could be a factor for determining social commitments

### **Part Three: Open-ended Responses**

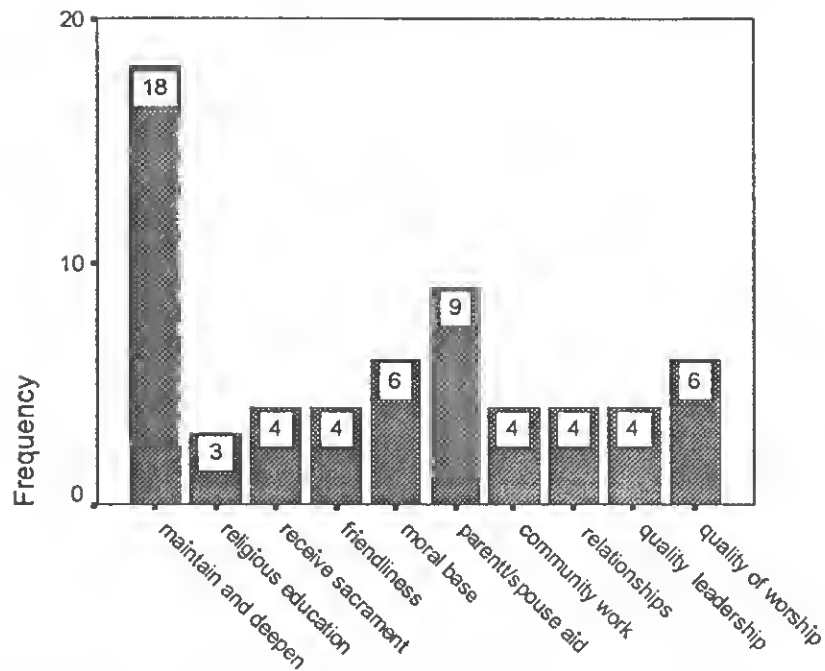
The open-ended questions generated a significant number of responses that were very direct and honest. The first question asked: Why do people stay connected with the church? The survey asked for five reasons to this question. However most respondents gave three to four answers. A total of 245 statements were condensed into 13 different variables. The coding of these statements listed below is not ranked in order of importance or priority.

1. Maintain and deepen relationship with God
2. Provide moral and ethical base
3. Parental or spousal support
4. Community involvement
5. Personal relationships
6. Times of crisis
7. Quality of leadership
8. Meaningful sermons
9. Quality of worship
10. Religious education
11. Reception of sacraments
12. Friendliness and openness of the parish community
13. Convenience of Mass schedule and location



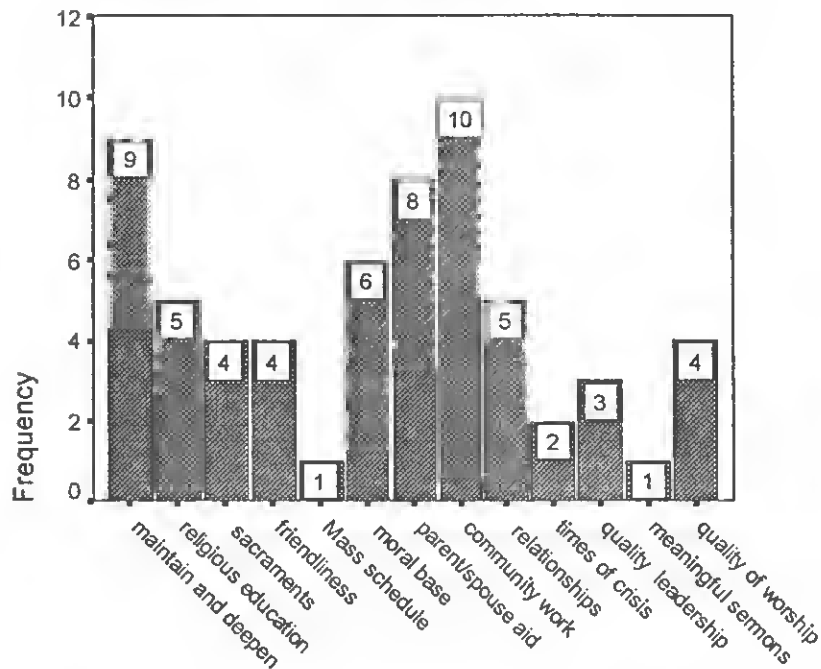
The first, second, and third highest responses are: to maintain and deepen a relationship with God; the influence and support of parents and/or spouse; community involvement. Forty-two of the 245 statements or approximately 21% mentioned in various ways the importance of maintaining and deepening a relationship with God. These are some of the responses: relationship with Christ; tools are there to build a better or stronger relationship with God; reaffirm personal commitment to Christ; God is important in my life; want to feel closer to God; praise God and follow His word and teaching.

Chart 1 Why do people stay connected



The second highest response dealt with community involvement. Thirty-four respondents listed community involvement as a high priority for staying in the parish. It was apparent, however, from the responses of the two focus groups that community has many different meanings. And to be involved as an active member likewise had different connotations. Some said being active meant going to Mass occasionally, participating in social activities, contributing to the support of the parish, or even becoming involved in a leadership role. The responses for the second category of membership included these key phrases: worship with those who have the same beliefs; at times we need comfort; personal friendships; opportunities for activity; involved at a variety of comfort levels; sense of community; emotional support when needed; community building; a feeling of belonging; acceptance and belonging to a group with positive experiences.

Chart 1B Why do people stay connected



The third ranking response was most interesting since it stated that parental or spousal influence was an important factor to stay connected to the Church. Twenty-seven or 11% of the respondents indicated this as a primary motivation. Phrases such as tradition, family history, belonging to a community that shares your beliefs, family tradition, cradle Catholic, set an example for their children, were the most quoted in this category. The charts that are printed in this section give the 13 basic reasons for staying in the church. There are five charts to illustrate how the responses were given for five entries. For personal reasons some respondents did not fill out all the five statements. Most likely they just ran out of good reasons or perhaps time.

Chart 1C Why do people stay connected

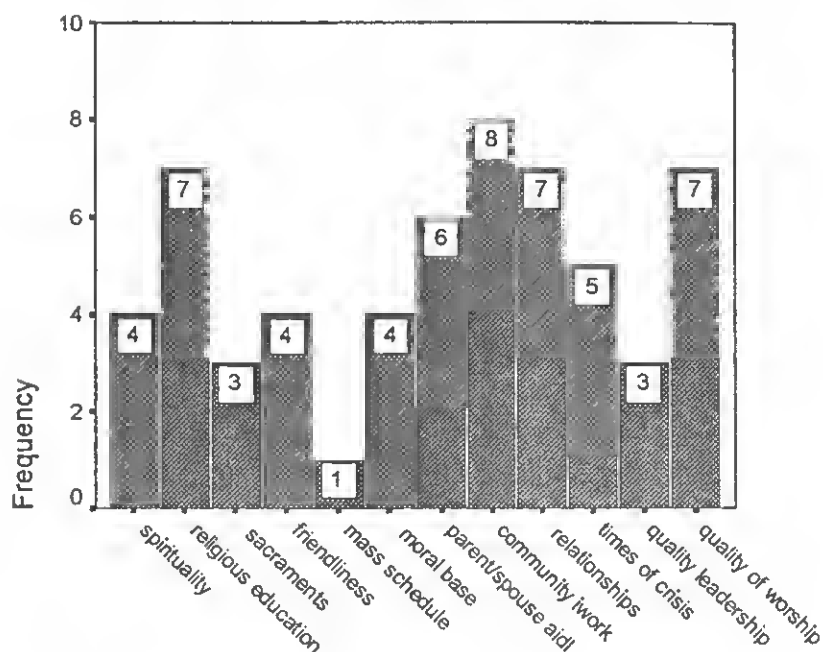
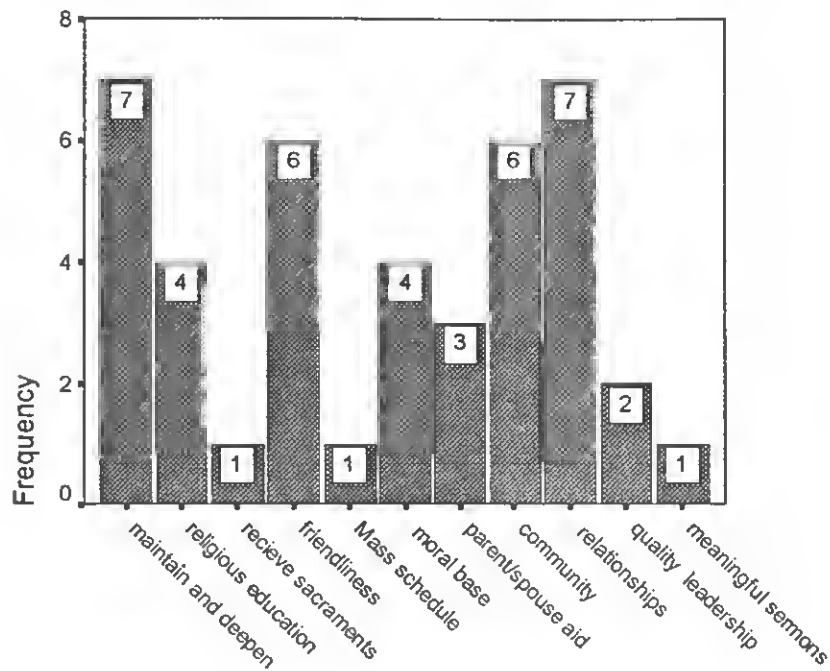


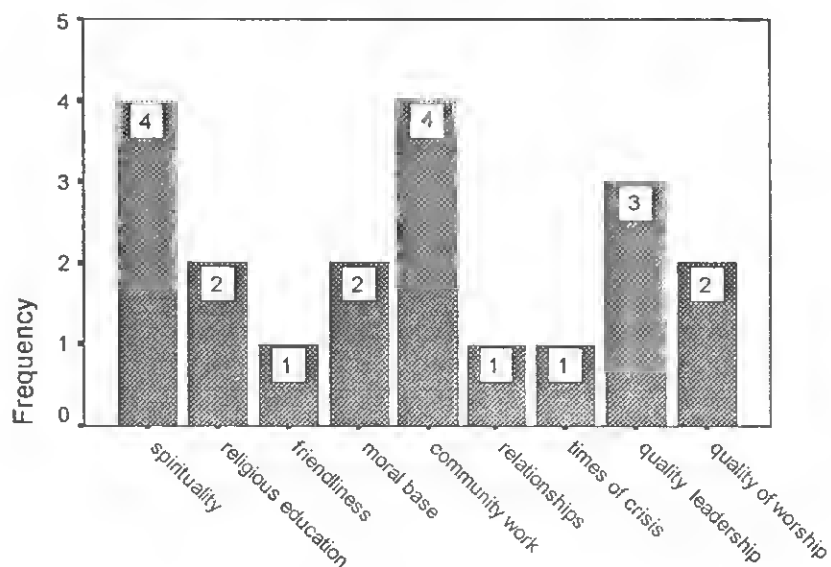
Chart 1C shows the decreasing number of responses but it does stress the importance of community involvement, religious education and quality of worship. If one combines the frequencies of personal relationship (7) with community involvement (8) it would appear that this is a highly desired feature of the returning inactive Catholic.

Chart 1D Why do people stay connected



The second half of the open-ended questions focussed on reasons why one would leave a parish. Out of a possible return of 320 responses from the 64 respondents there were 167 answers that were reduced to 16 variables. On the next page are the 16 variables that would cause a parishioner to move from one parish to another.

Chart 1 E Why do people stay connected



1. Relocation
2. Poor quality of preaching
3. Too much concern over money issues
4. Physical appearance of church
5. Spiritual needs not being met
6. Personal conflicts
7. Bad example of parish staff
8. Transfer to parish with day school
9. Family worships at a different parish
10. Change in pastors
11. Poor education programs
12. Inconvenient liturgy schedule
13. Little opportunity for personal involvement
14. Change in community outreach
15. Member not friendly or welcoming
16. Uncaring pastor

Relocation out of area was the first reason for leaving a parish. There were 36 respondents that indicated they would leave. Ever since St. Julie's parish was established in 1978 it has experienced much movement of parishioners in and out of the parish.

Perhaps the principal reason why so many move out is that the husband or wife has a job transfer out of the area. North Ridgeville is still considered a suburban bedroom community. The people who move into this city are predominantly young couples who are still establishing their growing families and are moving up in the job markets.

The second highest reason for leaving the parish is the unfriendly attitude of the membership. There were twenty-six respondents who listed this variable. This correlates directly with the remarks of the six respondents to the survey who were individually interviewed. Many of their comments about seeking a welcoming community reinforce their concerns. “ I want to meet people who share the same values and faith.” “ When I came here I found peace, a spirit of friendliness that I never experienced before.” “ I need a friendly welcoming community in a world that is now filled with fear and terrorism.” “I don’t want to be rejected by a very judgmental community.” All six were searching for a parish that was welcoming. Their experiences with previous parishes caused them to leave and to search for a parish that would welcome them.

The third reason for leaving the parish is a change in pastor and directly related to that would be the uncaring attitude of the pastor. There were twenty-five respondents who indicated that the pastor is crucial to their staying or leaving the parish. This factor is important to analyze thoroughly since it is the pastor who sets the tone for spirituality, educational, and social growth in the parish. If he micro-manages the parish to the detriment of the gifts and talents of the parishioners the damage done to their spiritual growth can be disastrous. The surveys indicated that parishioners are looking for good education for their children, opportunities to be involved in the parish and good liturgy and preaching. These factors depend largely upon the vision of the pastor, supported by his staff. If his ecclesiology is still pre-Vatican II, his effectiveness with the incoming new parishioner will hamper their efforts to be accepted and involved.

TABLE 8

REASONS YOU WOULD LEAVE THIS PARISH FOR ANOTHER		
Variable	Frequency	Percentage
1. Relocation out of area	36	22
2. Poor quality of preaching	9	5
3. Physical appearance of church	5	3
4. Too concerned over money issues	3	2
5. Spiritual needs not being met	8	5
6. Personal conflicts	5	3
7. Transfer to parish with day school	4	2
8. Change in pastor	14	8
9. Poor education programs	11	7
10. Inconvenient liturgy schedule	8	5
11. Little opportunity for personal involvement	6	4
12. Changes in community outreach	4	2
13. Members not friendly or welcoming	26	16
14. Bad example of current staff	5	3
15. Uncaring pastor	9	5
16. Family goes to a different parish	3	2

When economic issues are on everybody's minds because of the insecurity of the stock market, oil prices, job downsizing, and the threats of war and terrorism, it is significant that only three respondents mentioned money issues as a factor in leaving a parish. This might be caused by the very low profile that the pastor maintains when



discussing the parish finances. It also might be attributed to parishioners' willingness to support the parish and, therefore, they are not offended by appeals in the pulpit or bulletin for financial support. The current use of low profile letter campaigns to solicit increases in Sunday collections may be a factor in softening a preconceived idea that the church is always asking for money. It is evident to the author that an informed and active layperson will contribute regularly to the parish because he or she can see the value of supporting worthwhile programs that benefit the entire parish community.

The primary reason to leave the parish still remains relocation out of the area. One of the significant features about Saint Julie Billiart Church is that half of its membership comes from families who live outside the parish territorial boundaries. This means that some parishioners will drive five to fifteen miles to attend Mass on Sundays. This willingness to belong even though many of them relocate outside the parish boundaries is a sign that they still value the importance of ministry and fellowship in the parish. A parish survey taken in February 1997, which is included in the appendix, comments on some of the same reasons for staying with the parish even though living beyond the boundaries.<sup>1</sup>

The second and third reasons that would cause a parishioner to leave truly highlight the importance of clerical leadership in the faith community. While it is neither possible nor desirable to please every parishioner, the pastor still needs to provide a leadership role that is both servant oriented and sacramentally centered. This balance between prayer and work that models the Benedictine Rule of Life... *Ora et Labora*... is difficult to maintain. The overwhelming responses from the survey indicate that parishioners are looking for a gentle, prayerful, joyful, and discerning spiritual leader. They are not offended if he isn't a

good preacher or even talks about money or doesn't involve them in programs. What they initially desire is a community that is friendly, welcoming and caring. Once that is established it is inevitable that, under the influence of grace, spiritual growth and parish involvement will occur.

In the next and final chapter there will be the pastoral conclusions to this project. Also there will be some reflections about what this project meant to the writer. After an evaluation of the project from the perspective of what could or should have been done there will be some reflections about possible future explorations or research from this project. It will conclude with some ramifications for those in pastoral ministry and some thoughts about what this project adds to the field of pastoral theology.

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<sup>1</sup> See appendix for further data about the 1997 parish survey.

## Chapter Five

### Reflection, Evaluation and Conclusion

#### Part One Project's Strengths

From its inception three years ago this project was designed, written, and analyzed with the author's primary intention to provide a practical, readable and pastoral approach in ministering to the returning inactive Catholic. The research portion of the project did reveal that the documentation about the returning inactive Catholic was devoted largely to programs that would educate and encourage the individual to be integrated into the daily life of the parish. Many of the articles and books that are listed in the bibliography discussed why Catholics left the Church in the years after the Second Vatican Council and suggested means to educate them. For instance, the books written by William Bausch were particularly helpful to understand current efforts involving all members of a parish to be effective ministers and witnesses of the Gospel. In his books Thomas Sweetser, S.J. promotes an ecclesiology for the modern parish.<sup>1</sup> His insights helped the author to realize the vast potential of the gifts and talents in a parish that can occur when a visionary pastoral staff is truly open to collaboration.<sup>2</sup>

The data retrieved in this project strongly emphasized that the returning inactive Catholic parishioners had specific needs and concerns. The survey provided much data about the reasons for joining a parish and the factors that keep people active in the parish. It was mentioned in Chapter Four, page seventy-four, that the data from Table Six was most outstanding; there was almost total agreement from the participants that they wanted

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<sup>1</sup> Sweetser, Thomas, S.J., *The Parish as Covenant*, Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward, 2001.

<sup>2</sup> Sweetser co-authored with Patrica M. Forster, O.S.E., *Transforming the Parish-Models for the Future*, Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed & Ward, 1993.

a friendly faith community with opportunities to participate in parish programs, and solid youth and educational programs. Such characteristics do challenge any organized pastoral staff that is constantly evaluating the effectiveness of parish activities.

The summary of the conclusions to the first five sections of the survey do support the hypothesis of the project -- the returning inactive Catholic has different expectations and understanding of ecclesiology than the previous generation of pre and post Vatican II Catholics. Likewise, the conclusions from the two focus groups that were used in formulating the design of the self-administered survey strongly supported the premise that the returning inactive Catholic has some very strong feelings and expectations from the third millennium parish. Since it was not the intention of the author to identify reasons why formerly active Catholics left the Church, there was no research on this subject. However, it would be very helpful to identify the major causes for what has been described by theologians as leakage or the fadeaway Catholic syndrome. Dean Hoge, professor at Catholic University of America in Washington, D.C., is researching these factors from the perspective of a sociologist. His writings about religious changes among Catholics in the late 1970's indicated that a very personal approach must always be made for faith development. Although it was possible to include some of his conclusions in the analysis of the survey data it would have introduced another area that would have demanded more clarification and research. The basic strengths of this project come, therefore, from this primary focus on the motivating factors of the returning Catholic and what constitutes those factors once he/she is active in the Church. All the data from the survey, the focus groups, and the individual interviews with the local pastors and six

participants of the survey were derived from the initial inquiry about the returning inactive Catholic. This primary concern for that information makes the presentation of the material less complicated. It also makes the purpose of the project easier to identify and to assimilate.

Another strength is the pastoral reflections that have been part of the author's experience as the founding pastor of the test site parish, St. Julie Billiart in North Ridgeville, Ohio. It is a privilege as well as a real joy to establish a faith community literally from the ground up. In the twenty-five years that the author has been a pastor he has had the opportunity to reflect on many pastoral challenges. One of the more challenging aspects of being a pastor is to keep updated and renewed in all of the areas of pastoral theology. Admittedly this was not taught as a separate discipline prior to the Second Vatican Council in most major seminaries in the United States. This meant that many of the projects, programs and, especially the development of liturgical practices and training, evolved gradually. What was not experienced in actual practice was augmented by continuing education. Workshops, seminars, time out for sabbatical studies, readings from theological manuals and magazines, and discussions with brother priests and pastoral staffs all contributed to a deeper understanding of pastoral practice and theology. There was much innovative programming that had to be revised and amended to be effective. With all the experiences of starting literally a new parish from scratch, the author has a perspective and understanding that very few priests possess. Most priests are assigned to a functioning parish with a history and tradition. When a new parish is established none of the operating factors of an old parish can be used as normative. The pastor creates, with the assistance of his staff and newly organized parishioners, under the

guidance of the Holy Spirit, a community that is totally unique and still truly Catholic. The benchmark that he creates for the new parish does challenge the weak or misguided ecclesiology of the returning inactive parishioner. And with the challenge comes the great satisfaction that a stronger and more educated Catholic parishioner is being prepared for ministry.

It is from the experience of pastoral ministry for twenty-five years at St. Julie Billiart parish that the author has formulated this study. There was always a desire and a hope that his experiences and insights would be made available to other pastors who are experiencing similar situations in their ministry to returning Catholics. Although each parish has its own special identity and approach to ministry there are many similarities that every pastor experiences. How he deals with them can be assisted by this study.

It is also hoped that the annotated bibliography will be of practical assistance to the reader since it attempts to highlight an important section or comment from the text. The bibliography can be an important source for selected readings and for further exploration of the project's premises. It is not an exhaustive study of all the materials that have been published. It is intended to give an overview of the available resource and a sampling of the books and magazines that may already be available in the pastor's library.

## **Part 2 Areas for Further Research and Reflection**

As always, hindsight is present when the project is concluding and insights emerge about what should have or could have been done to enhance the results. In the beginning it was intended that the project would include a presentation on the phenomenon of the fadeaway Catholic. This is a presumably active Catholic parishioner, faithful and supportive of the parish's mission, who slowly starts backing off from Mass attendance

and normal church functions. His/her fading away and eventual leave of the parish are not explained to the pastor. The individual leaves the parish, usually for another faith community. There is also a major paradigm shift in the concept of a lifetime parishioner. With few exceptions almost every family is changing parishes and relocating out of the area. The fadeaway Catholic can also refer to those parishioners who register for a specific reason, such as a baptism or First Holy Communion. Once that sacramental need has been fulfilled the family recedes into the background of inactivity and apathy. These two examples of the fadeaway Catholic and the specific sacramental need oriented family are prime examples of further research. The study of these pastoral challenging factors could lead to much enrichment and understanding.

Could there have been more people to take the survey? This is a possible conclusion since the numbers ideally were to be one hundred and twenty. However a return of 63% or 64 respondents is an acceptable figure. The median age of the respondents in the survey was 33. A survey that would have limited the age of all respondents to 35 and under would, in the opinion of the author, have generated a different set of responses. The older group, that is, over 35, tended to be very active and supportive of the parish. They were in the parish longer than the younger age group and therefore had a better sense of church ministry than the others.

Another interesting feature that kept reoccurring in the focus groups and in individual interviews was the definition of an active parishioner. There was no consensus among the participants as to what this means to the average parishioner. The responses ran the gamut from regular Sunday Mass attendance to once a month attendance, from talking about the parish to friends and neighbors, to attending a social function once in a

while. There was no mention of consistent support or ministry involvement over a significant time frame. A study of the meaning of an active parishioner in the Catholic parish could be the subject of a very interesting Doctor of Ministry project.

The inclusion of the pastors' interviews did add another dimension to the data. All three adjacent parishes are experiencing rapid growth due to outmigration from the inner city of Cleveland, wholesale land development and housing growth. The steady influx of new families into their parishes can also be attributed to the fact that they all have well managed parochial grade schools. The test site for the survey does not have a grade school but sends many children to these parish schools. The influence of a parish grade school can easily offset the attraction of a small faith community without a parish school. Since the author has been dealing with this situation for twenty-five years he is painfully aware that many good parishioners will leave his parish to belong to a parish with a school. Many times the families move into the parish territory but go directly to the next parish that has a school. There is a tension that should not be present. But it is a fact of pastoral experience that a school community will be more attractive than a faith community, especially for the parents of grade school age children. A survey of parents of grade school children could investigate their primary reasons for joining a parish. Their responses would be most helpful to pastors of small, non parochial school parishes that feel the burden of having to be in a quasi-competition with bigger parishes.

The Church universal as well as the local diocese is experiencing a clergy shortage, diminishing church revenues, and growing apathy among good parishioners. To face these challenges of the millennium church there needs to be some initiative for collaboration and support among pastoral staffs and parishes. Bishop Anthony Pilla of the



Cleveland Diocese in Ohio wrote a very clear pastoral letter in the year 2000 entitled **Vibrant Parish Life.**<sup>3</sup> He clearly stated that vibrant parish life is best achieved through the collaborative efforts of several ministries and communities in an area, and that these ministries will often permeate parish boundaries. The implementation of this goal will take years to accomplish in spite of the clarion call of the bishop to start the process of study, reflection, and action. He emphasized the critical need for all to do their part to plant the seeds and lay the foundation for collaboration and unity that will deepen in time. There is one outstanding statement that summarizes the importance of the local church. “As the parish goes, so does the faith of the people.”<sup>4</sup> It is the firm conviction of this author that the parish cannot stay isolated and continue to do maintenance ministry. It has to look beyond its own limited physical boundaries and overworked staff to the challenging opportunity of sharing and developing resources with other parishes. When the pastors stop thinking in the singular and begin to speak in the plural, then, and only then, will there be some hope for the future church. This study of the returning inactive Catholic could really be enhanced by further exploratory search on the issues surrounding parishes with and without grade schools.

### **Part Three How has this project enhanced my ministry?**

In the years following the author’s ordination in 1962, he has been personally motivated to continue his education in updating his theology training from the major seminary. Since he was ordained before the Second Vatican Council there was the immediate need to be updated in all the theological changes, especially in the areas of

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<sup>3</sup> Pilla, Anthony M., *Vibrant Parish Life*. Diocese of Cleveland, Ohio: 2002

liturgy, ecclesiology, and the interaction of lay and clerical ministry. He received a Master of Divinity degree from St. Mary Seminary, Cleveland, Ohio in 1970. In the spring of the year 2000 the opportunity arose to apply for admission to the Graduate School of Theology at Saint Mary Seminary in Wickliffe, Ohio. The Graduate School of Theology was offering for the first time a three-year program that would conclude with the reception of the Doctor of Ministry degree in the spring of 2003. The author was pleasantly surprised when he was accepted along with nine other clergymen from a list of twenty-five applicants. From that time on the life and ministry of the author has dramatically changed. The initial entry into a school environment after thirty years was dramatic enough. The biggest challenge was adapting to changes in pastoral duties, scheduling, time management, and the adjustment to an educational environment.

The experience of weekly classes and seminars for the first two years of the course was challenging and very stimulating. The classroom atmosphere was very relaxed since all ten participants were highly motivated clergymen who wanted to share their experiences of ministry with each other. The instructors were all chosen by the project director because of their expertise in specific areas of theology. The core courses were excellent updating of the latest studies in scripture, preaching, pastoral theology, spiritual direction, leadership training, and statistical analysis. The reading and writing assignments each week took up all the free time that was available once the primary work of the parish was concluded. The author had to change his time schedule and outside parish activities to accommodate the amount of work that had to be finished every week for the Wednesday classes. The discipline of rising at least one hour earlier every day just

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<sup>4</sup> Ibid. Par. 2.

to spend time reading and writing before morning Mass was a dramatic change. The author quickly discovered that the best time period for study and writing was from early morning to mid-afternoon. This time schedule change has become so habitual that the author can truly say it is one of the unexpected results of the project.

The six priests and four protestant ministers really did not know each other very well at all when they first met in August 2002 at the seminary. Over the three years they have become close friends, sharing each other's successes and trials. There has emerged among them a camaraderie and closeness that was truly unexpected in the beginning of this project. The ecumenical benefits have been very rewarding as we shared our theological insights, pastoral experiences and expectations. In the first two years the class met regularly before dinner for refreshments and relaxation. These sharing sessions and the time spent together at meals solidified their friendship and encouraged them to continue with their individual projects.

In this age of computers, fax machines, e-mail, and palm pilots it became very important to learn the basic skills of word processing for the course work. The author admits that he had very limited computer skills, but time, patience, and a lot of support from the parish staff helped him to be more proficient and knowledgeable. He has plans to continue updating his computer skills after the conclusion of the project. It is very clear that this is the age of electronic communications and the parish must use every available means to spread the Gospel message. Throughout the project formulation and writing the author had to use e-mail, the fax machine, and the computer on a daily basis. The use of these tools not only for the course work but the instant communication with parishioners

has been another outstanding outcome of the project. Without these very efficient means of writing and communicating the pastor's work would not be very effective.

Another very beneficial aspect of the project has been the experience of research and reading more than forty books in two and a half years. It has not been easy to return to formal studies after thirty years when the author studied for the Master of Divinity degree. Also it was a challenge to keep up with classmates who were anywhere from ten to twenty-five years younger than the author. Needless to say, he gave up on that idea and proceeded at his own pace. There is a sense of pride, accomplishment, and personal satisfaction that a priest in his mid-sixties, pastor of a small but very active parish, has been able to successfully conclude this project. The time spent in the library and the computer in researching background material for the project enhanced the author's skills in data retrieval and analysis. The support from the seminary librarian and the teaching staff and mentors gave encouragement to the author when at times the work load seemed overwhelming. Their professional guidance and support helped him in those occasions to stay focussed and work at a reasonable pace. After reading more than forty books and numerous articles for the course work and the research of the project, the author has been energized and very much awed by the sheer amount of the material that he has digested. It has helped him to be more reflective in his daily pastoral duties.

Most men, especially the clergy, have been accused for generations of being insensitive, goal oriented, and largely oblivious to the needs and feelings of women and the marginalized members of society. The time and effort spent on this project has made the author very aware of his personal limitations in the area of theology updating and the effective skills needed in counseling. While there has been much growth in these areas

there is the motivation largely fueled by the course work to continue further studies in these areas. The significant personal outcomes of this project have been the updating of current theological studies, pastoral skills, especially in preaching and management. This project has enhanced the author's ministry on so many levels that it is very difficult to choose which one was outstanding. The data from the survey and the focus groups emphasized the importance of a caring and sensitive, non-judgmental pastor. The author believes that this information needs to be digested and skills honed to face the challenges of church ministry. This insight and the need to review regularly what image the pastor projects to his congregation will, in the opinion of the author, greatly enhance his ministry.

#### **Part Four How this project can effect those in ministry**

Everybody agrees that there just isn't enough time and energy in the day or the week to do the work that is demanded in pastoral ministry. The clergyperson has been accustomed to the 24/7 workday schedule long before that slogan became popular. If there is anything the pastor doesn't need, it is another meeting, seminar, theological manual, or mandatory reading material from the chancery office that is not useful or practical for his/her ministry. Although this is a common complaint, there is the real necessity of keeping updated, and being aware of trends and cycles in church membership. One must pick and choose what seems to be most important or practical because of time or energy constraints.

It is very clear to the author that the first meeting of a returning inactive Catholic with the pastor or a pastoral staff member must be conducted very prudently. How he

greet, welcomes, and gently questions the returnee sets the stage for a non-threatening re-entry. After all, it can be a very intimidating experience as a stranger to be ushered into the pastor's study for the first time. It can take a long time also for new parishioners to feel welcomed and accepted by the rest of the church. That is why it is so important that the first experience with the new church, namely, the pastor, be a pleasant one.

Having said this as a preamble the author sincerely hopes that the reading of this project will encourage the pastor to evaluate sincerely his/her approach to incoming new parishioners. The articles and books cited in this study are readily available from the seminary library or the local public library. Additional readings and references can be downloaded from religion databases on the Internet.

The efforts of every pastor to increase membership can be supported and enhanced by taking advantage of these resources. One conclusion from the survey stressed the importance of a supportive staff and a friendly congregation. So often simple and common sense suggestions do not get a hearing as much as complicated and over organized programs that are promoted by widely known speakers or theologians. The attraction of a new program that is touted as being the latest in its field can obscure the findings that come from the experiences and conclusions of active and thoughtful pastors. The findings from this study again stress the importance of being open to dialogue, to listen with empathy, and to be reconciliatory. If the pastor projects the image that he/she is always busy then the lines of communication even with the key members of the congregation will be diminished.

One of the basic conclusions from this study that the author personally experienced was the importance of listening carefully to what people are saying when they are

returning to the Church. And sometimes it is not so much what they are saying but what they have not said. The returnee very often has a hidden agenda, if you will, that obscures sometimes the fundamental reason for previous inactivity in the church and now the desire to return. He or she can have a very limited understanding of the basics of the faith, the concept of the church's mission, the sacraments, and church law. The data from the survey, for example, indicated that many needed to have their marriage blessed. Twenty-five percent or 16 out of 64 respondents confused a marriage validation with a simple blessing of their union. It has also been the experience of the author as pastor for twenty-five years that a significant number of families will stop attending Mass simply because the time scheduling is inconvenient. They will attend services at another parish and eventually will drop membership from the original parish. Parish loyalty gives way to convenience and the personal choices of the parishioner. So often there is no opportunity for dialogue because the pastor is not immediately aware of the changes and, therefore, cannot address the situation.

Finally, every returning inactive Catholic has a story to share, a history to unfold that eventually will lead to a healing and reconciliation with the church. This return will be greatly facilitated by a sensitive, caring, listening pastor. This project reinforces the need for everybody in pastoral ministry, not just the pastor, to be aware of the difficulties new parishioners experience when returning to the church. If the staff uses the basic conclusions of this survey they will be able to assure the returning inactive parishioner that those programs and services that they need are present and available to them in their new parish. No longer can a pastor take for granted that people will automatically join his/her parish when they move into the area. People want choices in all they do, and this

extends to church membership. This means that the pastor in a sense is in a free market enterprise and needs to sell the parish's commodities of service and sacraments to a very critical customer. This means updating, revising, and evaluating what happens on a daily basis in the parish. The pastor cannot sit in his comfortable leather swivel chair in his study and wait for new parishioners to appear. He/she needs to be proactive in reaching out and welcoming the legions of lost, lonely, and lax souls who are reaching out for acceptance and a loving faith community.

### **Part Five Contributions to field of practical theology**

It is the humble opinion of the author that this project, though limited in its scope, can contribute some valuable insights and information. Since theology has been described as faith seeking understanding, there seems that, even in this study, there can be some practical contributions to the field of pastoral theology. The research on the models of the church and the parish by Avery Dulles and Killian Sabbas indicated that no one model totally embraces the mystery that is the Church Universal. Every Christian man and woman who seek a personal relationship with Christ uniquely receives the Word of God in the Eucharist and the Sacred Scriptures. Everybody's faith is challenged by the spirit of the world, the devil, and the inner weakness or dark side of our natures that favor the material over the spiritual. It is so easy to accept what you can see or touch. And it is very hard to live by faith when the world demands signs that even Jesus in his time refused to give.

The ecclesiology put forth by the Second Vatican Council changed the thrust or focus of the Church's mission in the world from leader to servant. The hierarchical



structure of the Church that stressed authority of the pope and bishops underwent a dramatic change. All share in the priesthood, all have power, responsibility, and all have dignity. The most common image of the Church is now the People of God, all on a pilgrimage of faith to the Kingdom, present in the world but not yet fully realized until the end of the ages. The pastor stands at a unique period in the Church's history. He does have authority and great responsibility as a shepherd of souls. No longer though can he assume that the respect, love, and trust that was part of the office in previous years will be given to him unquestionably by the congregation. The failure of the United States Catholic hierarchy in 2002 to deal honestly and resolutely with the sexual scandals of church ministers has eroded confidence in their authority as well as cast a pallor of mistrust and suspicion over the entire presbyterate of the Catholic church in America. The church minister has to earn his/her trust from the faithful. No longer is it given automatically. This tragic chain of events that goes back as far as thirty or forty years has truly caused much pain, sadness, anger, and frustration among the clergy and laity alike. The victims of sexual abuse must be cared for with sensitivity and compassion. And the perpetrators of those evil acts must be removed from active ministry. How the returning inactive Catholic feels about this situation is not clear. The confused state of many good Catholics about the credibility of the Church's teaching authority makes the task even harder to clarify.

The notion of Church and parish for the incoming inactive Catholic is mingled with threads of traditionalism, practical realism, unrealized goals, and unrealistic expectations. This mixture creates a tapestry woven into a pattern of previous church experiences that color and define church and parish identity. The task of the pastor and the pastoral team

is to restructure the incoming parishioners' understanding of the Church and the parish. The theological concepts of the Mystical Body and the hierarchical authority of the Pope and the bishops in union with him do not motivate or even, for the most part, interest the average Catholic. The rethinking of the notions of Church as promulgated by the Second Vatican Council do provide a benchmark for a creative and innovative pastoral staff.

The returning inactive Catholic is seeking a spirituality that connects them to the Divine but not necessarily in the same way as previous generations that considered as normal Sunday Mass attendance and regular reception of the Sacraments of Eucharist and Reconciliation. In an article edited by James Martin in the March 10, 2003 issue of *America* he states that a surprising number of studies suggest that the appeal of traditional devotions among younger Catholics is on the rise.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps the phenomenon of a growing conservatism among Catholics under 40 is causing this. The return to the rosary, Stations of the Cross, and novenas may have appeal to the current generation that never experienced them regularly in childhood. Now they may see in these devotions a greater sense of mystery in their lives. This is an interesting premise that can be used by the pastor as a possible link or bridge to reentry into the parish of the third millennium.

The returning Catholic adult has been raised in an age that accepts pluralism in theological concepts, freedom of choice in matter of faith and morals, and a general acceptance or attitude that all religions are equally good or valid. It appears that the average Catholic has very limited understanding of the Church's basic teachings on faith and morals. The busy pastor needs to address this critical issue by developing a solid adult catechesis that will properly inform and motivate new members. Many Catholics

are leaving the Church to join more fundamentalist churches that stress authority and inerrancy of the Bible as the primary source of Revelation. These very conservative churches are attracting new members because they offer a clear and definite concept of salvation. Faith alone, however, is not sufficient unless prayer, good moral living, and acts of charity support it. The average Catholic knows this more intuitively than he or she realizes. The task for the Catholic parish today is to rework or modernize the fundamentals of the Catholic Church's rich traditions in such a way that they are attractive and persuasive. Now is the opportune time for the pastor to put new wine into new wineskins. He can share the richness of the Church's liturgy, sacraments, and ministry with those new members who are returning with old and tattered traditions but want to be clothed with the new garments of the Catholic faith. Parishioners are not registering to join committees or to serve brownies or donuts after Mass. They are searching for a renewed hope, a strong and vibrant faith community, and a pastor and staff that are truly committed to the Lord. They need the confidence and skills of the pastor to guide, direct, and lead them in their faith journey.

The contributions of this project to pastoral theology are the insights and conclusions of the men and women who were honest in their responses about reasons to belong and remain in the Catholic Church. They give hope and confidence to the pastor who sometimes wonders if his efforts are worthwhile and are truly effective. The author believes that the research from this project could help the developing field of pastoral theology by integrating the personal reflections of the pastors and staff members. Their

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<sup>5</sup> Martin, Jame, S.J., ed. *America*. Contemporary Catholics on Traditional Devotions. Vol. 188, No. 8, March 10, 2003.

experiences in interviewing the returning inactive Catholic and especially their reflections why they returned are invaluable. The statement that theology is faith seeking understanding can be the catalyst for further exploration into those methods to promote the wisdom of our Church's teaching. Pastoral theologians need not overly dwell on those reasons that may or may not have alienated previous church membership. They should concentrate rather on a theology of welcoming, acceptance without diminishing or excusing error, and renewal.

The core results of this project did provide some excellent affirmation of what the modern parish should be offering to the twenty-first century Catholic parishioner. It also showed some concern about leadership roles among the laity. Less than 28% felt it was available on the parish level. This statistic indicates that there is a need for a very intensive effort to integrate all parishioners into the life and growth of the parish. Bishop Pilla said in his pastoral, *Vibrant Parish Life*, that as the parish goes, so does the faith of the church. The author believes that pastoral theology is on the verge of further growth and development because of the increasing demand for solid catechesis, meaningful liturgies, and lay involvement in the local parish. The shared research and experiences of theologians and pastors in the areas of spirituality, leadership, catechesis, and especially liturgy, will lead to more solid and practical principles in pastoral theology. It is the author's hope that the reflections and data analysis of the project will support the busy pastors in their efforts to be true spiritual leaders. May they be sensitive and affirming in enabling the parishioners to work collaboratively in building up the Kingdom of God.

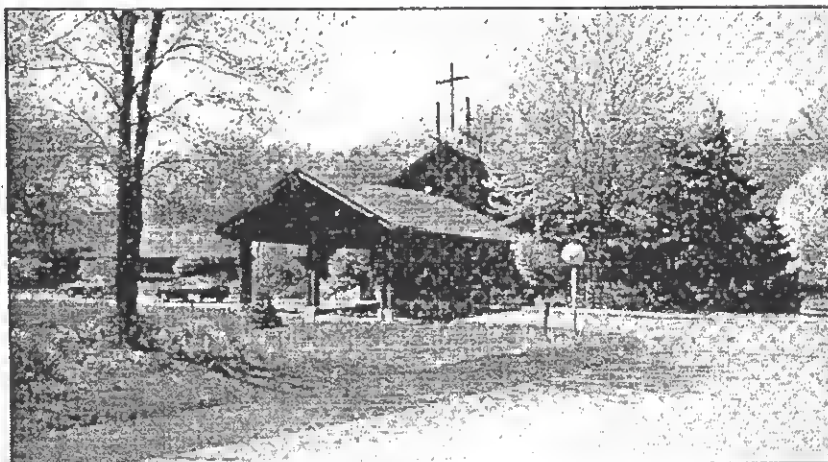
## APPENDIX



Group Self-Administered Questionnaire  
Survey on Church Attitudes

**St. Julie Billiard Church**

North Ridgeville, Ohio



Rev. Richard A. Gonser, Pastor

The purpose of this questionnaire is to gather basic information about attitudes and feelings about the Contemporary Catholic Parish. Your opinions on why people return to active membership and how they relate in that church would be appreciated.

1. This section is designed to discover the reasons why adults (20-40) are returning to active membership in the Catholic Church. Using these statements please reflect on your own experience and answer each statement with your level of agreement.

There are four categories... Atmosphere of Worship... Quality of Worship...  
Spiritual and Personal Needs... Sacramental Needs..

#### A. Atmosphere of Worship

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. The pastor is friendly and welcoming.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
2. The ministers at Mass are friendly.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
3. The grounds & building of the parish are appealing.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
4. People reach out to welcome strangers at Mass.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
5. Talking in Church is acceptable.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>

#### B. Quality of Worship

1. Sunday Masses meet my spiritual needs.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
2. Sermons are well delivered.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
3. Music is well suited for worship.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
4. Congregation participates.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
5. Time of Masses meets my schedule.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
6. There are many & varied prayer opportunities for personal devotion in the parish.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>



	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
<b>C. Spiritual &amp; Personal Need</b>				
1. A crisis of faith has led me back to the Church.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
2. A serious illness or death has led me back to the Church.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
3. I have a desire for a deeper relationship with Christ.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
4. I need to receive the Sacraments more often.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
<b>D. Sacramental Needs</b>				
1. Somebody in my family needs to be baptized.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
2. My child needs to be prepared for First Holy Communion.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
3. A family member wants to get married at our Church.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
4. My marriage needs to be blessed in the Church.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
5. Member of my family needs to receive Reconciliation.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
6. There is a need to receive Confirmation.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>
7. There is a need to receive the Anointing of the Sick.	1 <input type="text"/>	2 <input type="text"/>	3 <input type="text"/>	4 <input type="text"/>





II. This section is asking you to answer briefly in a few sentences your opinion about membership in the Church.

1. Why do people stay connected with the Church? Please give 3-5 reasons.

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. \_\_\_\_\_

2. What would cause you to leave this parish for another? Please give 3-5 reasons.

- a. \_\_\_\_\_
- b. \_\_\_\_\_
- c. \_\_\_\_\_
- d. \_\_\_\_\_
- e. \_\_\_\_\_

III. In the box on the right side of the survey are responses to statements about the Church.

They are ranked from strongly agree to strongly disagree. Please check the appropriate Box.

	Strongly Agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly Disagree
1. People are searching for a friendly faith community.	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>
2. People check out other parishes before joining.	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>
3. The friendliness of the pastor and staff is important.	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>
4. It is important to be given opportunities to participate in the parish programs.	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>
5. A strong youth program is important.	1 <input type="checkbox"/>	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	3 <input type="checkbox"/>	4 <input type="checkbox"/>



- |   | Strongly Agree             | Agree                      | Disagree                   | Strongly Disagree          |
|---|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|----------------------------|
| 6. A solid education program for children is essential.   | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 7. The worship (Mass- Sacraments) are well prepared.      | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> |
| 8. Sermons are to be well prepared and relate to my life. | 1 <input type="checkbox"/> | 2 <input type="checkbox"/> | 3 <input type="checkbox"/> | 4 <input type="checkbox"/> |

IV. This section deals with attitudes toward the Catholic Church. Please circle the appropriate answer

1. In view of the current crises in the Church concerning clergy and sexual abuse would you consider this a reason for dropping out from active membership in the parish.
 

1 <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	No
----------------------------	-----	----------------------------	----

 Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
2. I feel the church services give me inspiration to live up to my best during the week.
 

1 <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	No
----------------------------	-----	----------------------------	----

 Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
3. I believe in a formal religion but I seldom go to church.
 

1 <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	No
----------------------------	-----	----------------------------	----

 Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
4. I believe that active church membership is essential for witnessing my faith in God.
 

1 <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	No
----------------------------	-----	----------------------------	----

 Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_
  
5. I do not fully understand the dogmas or truths of the church.
 

1 <input type="checkbox"/>	Yes	2 <input type="checkbox"/>	No
----------------------------	-----	----------------------------	----

 Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_  
 \_\_\_\_\_



6. I feel that my church attendance is a fair index of support to the parish.

1 ☐ Yes      2 ☐ No

Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

7. I feel that I can worship God better out of doors than in the church.

1 ☐ Yes      2 ☐ No

Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

8. I enjoy my church because there is a spirit of friendliness there.

1 ☐ Yes      2 ☐ No

Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

9. My parish reaches out to me.

1 ☐ Yes      2 ☐ No

Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

10. I believe that the church is the greatest influence for good government and right living.

1 ☐ Yes      2 ☐ No

Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

11. I like the ceremonies of my church but do not miss them much when I am away.

1 ☐ Yes      2 ☐ No

Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

12. I like to go to church to develop my faith and strengthen my community.

1 ☐ Yes      2 ☐ No

Why is that? \_\_\_\_\_

\_\_\_\_\_

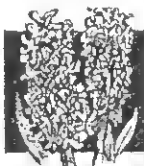


V. The next ten statements indicate reasons why you would join a parish. Please indicate on a scale from five to one your opinion. Five meaning most important to One least important

1. Quality of pastoral care and concern provided by parish priest. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
2. Friendliness and /or concern among parish members. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
3. Style of worship that is typical of the parish. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
4. Quality of preaching at Mass. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
5. My friends belong to this parish. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
6. Atmosphere of the church itself. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
7. Opportunities for parishioners to participate in community service. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
8. Opportunity to get my children involved in the parish youth programs and/or educational programs. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
9. The involvement of the parish in the local community. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5
10. Opportunities for becoming a lay leader in our congregation. 1.....2.....3.....4.....5

VI. This section identifies your spiritual journey at this time. Please circle the appropriate answer after the statement.

- A. Check the sacraments you have already received:
- 1 ☐ Baptism
  - 2 ☐ Reconciliation/Confession
  - 3 ☐ Eucharist
  - 4 ☐ Confirmation
  - 5 ☐ Marriage
- B. How often do you attend Sunday Mass?  
(Please check only one box)
- 1 ☐ Weekly
  - 2 ☐ Monthly
  - 3 ☐ 3-6 times a year
  - 4 ☐ Twice a year
  - 5 ☐ Almost Never
  - 6 ☐ Christmas and/or Easter



- C. How long have you been a registered member of this parish?
- 1 ☐ 1-6 months  
 2 ☐ 6 months - 1 year  
 3 ☐ 1-2 years  
 4 ☐ 3-5 years  
 5 ☐ 5 years or more

- D. Marital Status
- 1 ☐ Married      4 ☐ Remarried  
 2 ☐ Single      5 ☐ Widowed  
 3 ☐ Divorced

- E. Active Membership ( more than attending Mass on Sunday) This means that you participate in a parish program or in a leadership or ministry role.
- 1 ☐ Serve on no committees  
 2 ☐ Serve on one or two committees  
 3 ☐ Serve on 3 or more committees

- F. My Age is:
- 1 ☐ 20-25      4 ☐ 36-40  
 2 ☐ 26-30      5 ☐ 41-45  
 3 ☐ 31-35      6 ☐ 46-Over

- G. Gender:
- 1 ☐ Male      2 ☐ Female

H. No. of Children	I. Ages of Children	J. Please check Sacraments Children Still Need to Receive
1 <input type="checkbox"/> 1-2	1 Child 1 _____ 2 Child 2 _____	1 Child 1 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Bapt. 2 Child 2 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Bapt. 3 Child 3 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Bapt.
2 <input type="checkbox"/> 3-4	3 Child 3 _____ 4 Child 4 _____	2 <input type="checkbox"/> Rec. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Rec. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Rec.
3 <input type="checkbox"/> 5 or more	5 Child 5 _____ 6 Child 6 _____	3 <input type="checkbox"/> Euch. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Euch. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Euch.
		4 <input type="checkbox"/> Conf. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Conf. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Conf.
		4 Child 4 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Bapt. 5 Child 5 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Bapt. 6 Child 6 1 <input type="checkbox"/> Bapt.
		2 <input type="checkbox"/> Rec. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Rec. 2 <input type="checkbox"/> Rec.
		3 <input type="checkbox"/> Euch. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Euch. 3 <input type="checkbox"/> Euch.
		4 <input type="checkbox"/> Conf. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Conf. 4 <input type="checkbox"/> Conf.



This concludes the questionnaire. However, I am looking for a small group to be interviewed personally. To enrich these responses from the survey I would like to get some detailed input from you. Your response will be most helpful to analyze reasons why inactive Catholics are returning to the church. Please sign your name and telephone number on this page.

☐ Yes, I would be happy to be interviewed for approximately 15 minutes as a part of this survey.

Name \_\_\_\_\_

Telephone \_\_\_\_\_

## Survey Tool

## St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

### Vibrant Parish Life Demographics Report

Date: 2/27/2003

Group: St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

Responses: 385

**1. What is your status at this Parish?**

11.9% 1 Regular attender but not registered (46/385)

85.5% 2 Registered parishoner (329/385)

2.6% No Response (10 / 385)

**2. How active are you in this parish?**

22.1% 1 Not active (no involvement beyond attending Mass) (85/385)

46.5% 2 Somewhat active (attend some parish events in addition to Mass, but do not usually volunteer) (179/385)

28.8% 3 Highly active (member of parish staff, council, commision or committee; a PSR teacher, liturgical minister or regular volunteer) (111/385)

2.6% No Response (10 / 385)

**3. How attached do you feel to this parish?**

2.3% 1 Not at all attached (9/385)

39.0% 2 Somewhat attached (150/385)

55.6% 3 Very attached (214/385)

3.1% No Response (12 / 385)

**4. How often do you usually atten Mass at this parish?**

1.0% 1 Only for special occasions (4/385)

4.2% 2 Once a month (16/385)

13.2% 3 About 2-3 times a month (51/385)

70.9% 4 Once a week (273/385)

7.5% 5 More than once a week (29/385)

3.1% No Response (12 / 385)

**5. Race / Ethnicity**

0.3% 1 African American / Black (1/385)

90.6% 2 Anglo / White / European (349/385)

0.8% 3 Asian / Pacific Islander (3/385)

0.8% 4 Hispanic / Latino (3/385)

3.6% 5 Native American / American Indian (14/385)

3.9% No Response (15 / 385)

**6. Current Marital Status**

13.5% 1 Single and never married (52/385)

69.4% 2 Married (267/385)

1.0% 3 Seperated (4/385)

6.5% 4 Divorced (25/385)

6.2% 5 Widowed (24/385)

3.4% No Response (13 / 385)

**7. Age Category**

8.3% 1 14-17 (32/385)

4.4% 2 18-25 (17/385)

13.2% 3 26-39 (51/385)

31.7% 4 40-55 (122/385)

28.8% 5 56-69 (111/385)

10.4% 6 70 or older (40/385)

3.1% No Response (12 / 385)

**8. Gender**

55.8% 1 Female (215/385)

40.0% 2 Male (154/385)

4.2% No Response (16 / 385)

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BRILLIANT



## Survey Tool

## St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

### Vibrant Parish Life Answer Group Report

Date: 2/27/2003    Group: St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

Responses: 385

Answer Groups Selected : Important to Me  
Range : Highest

These are the 10 questions with the highest valid mean scores for the answer groups selected.

- 1 The parish exhibiting a spirit of warmth and hospitality (Valid Mean = 6.47)(#24)
- 2 The parish as a supportive, caring community (Valid Mean = 6.44)(#21)
- 3 New members of the parish are welcomed (Valid Mean = 6.38)(#25)
- 4 Promotion of respect for human life (Valid Mean = 6.32)(#19)
- 5 Masses that are prayerful, reverent and spiritually moving (Valid Mean = 6.30)(#1)
- 6 Support for families who have experienced death (Valid Mean = 6.22)(#20)
- 7 Religious education for children (Valid Mean = 6.18)(#8)
- 8 Parish leadership that listens to the concerns of parishioners (Valid Mean = 6.08)(#32)
- 9 Outreach to the poor (Valid Mean = 6.08)(#17)
- 10 An interior environment that creates a good atmosphere for worship (Valid Mean = 5.98)(#2)

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## Survey Tool

## St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

### Vibrant Parish Life Answer Group Report

Date: 2/27/2003

Group: St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

Responses: 385

Answer Groups Selected : Important to Me  
Range : Lowest

These are the 10 questions with the lowest valid mean scores for the answer groups selected.

- 1 An understanding of major world religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism) (Valid Mean = 4.57)(#29)
- 2 Annually publishing a parish financial statement (Valid Mean = 4.84)(#33)
- 3 Devotional services (rosary, stations, evening prayer, etc.) (Valid Mean = 4.86)(#6)
- 4 Access to a Catholic Elementary school in the area (Valid Mean = 4.86)(#11)
- 5 Encouragement of religious vocations (Valid Mean = 5.00)(#7)
- 6 The availability of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) (Valid Mean = 5.03)(#3)
- 7 An annual stewardship appeal, asking people for commitments of time, talent, and treasure (Valid Mean = 5.27)(#34)
- 8 Invitation of members to share the responsibility of leadership (Valid Mean = 5.31)(#30)
- 9 The Rite of Christian Initiation for Adults (Valid Mean = 5.39)(#22)
- 10 Encouragement of parish members to work for social justice (Valid Mean = 5.42)(#16)

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Survey Tool

St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

### Vibrant Parish Life Answer Group Report

Date: 2/27/2003

Group: St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

Responses: 385

Answer Groups Selected : How Well Done  
Range : Highest

These are the 10 questions with the highest valid mean scores for the answer groups selected.

- 1 Well-maintained parish facilities and grounds (Valid Mean = 6.50)(#36)
- 2 A church large enough for worship (Valid Mean = 6.45)(#38)
- 3 Easy access to the church and parish facilities for the physically disabled (Valid Mean = 6.39)(#37)
- 4 Promotion of respect for human life (Valid Mean = 6.39)(#19)
- 5 New members of the parish are welcomed (Valid Mean = 6.36)(#25)
- 6 Adequate facilities for meetings and other activities (Valid Mean = 6.36)(#39)
- 7 The parish exhibiting a spirit of warmth and hospitality (Valid Mean = 6.34)(#24)
- 8 Cooperation with groups in the community to meet local needs (food pantry, blood drives, etc.) (Valid Mean = 6.28)(#18)
- 9 The parish as a supportive, caring community (Valid Mean = 6.26)(#21)
- 10 Outreach to the poor (Valid Mean = 6.23)(#17)

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BRILLIANT

## Survey Tool

## St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

### Vibrant Parish Life Answer Group Report

Date: 2/27/2003

Group: St. Julie Billiart - North Ridgeville

Responses: 385

Answer Groups Selected : How Well Done  
Range : Lowest

These are the 10 questions with the lowest valid mean scores for the answer groups selected.

- 1 An understanding of major world religions (Islam, Hinduism, Buddhism, Judaism) (Valid Mean = 3.75)(#29)
- 2 Sensitivity to people with special needs (divorced, separated, single parents, disabled, etc.) (Valid Mean = 5.18)(#13)
- 3 Sensitivity to religious diversity within families (Valid Mean = 5.24)(#27)
- 4 Outreach to non-practicing Catholics (Valid Mean = 5.44)(#26)
- 5 Encouragement of religious vocations (Valid Mean = 5.49)(#7)
- 6 Programs that strengthen and foster family life (Valid Mean = 5.55)(#10)
- 7 The availability of the Sacrament of Reconciliation (Confession) (Valid Mean = 5.56)(#3)
- 8 Parish leadership that listens to the concerns of parishioners (Valid Mean = 5.61)(#32)
- 9 Encouragement of parish members to work for social justice (Valid Mean = 5.63)(#16)
- 10 Encouragement of racial and ethnic harmony (Valid Mean = 5.63)(#15)

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## PARISH HISTORY

St. Julie Billiart Parish was formally established on August 15, 1978. Founding pastor is the current pastor, Fr. Richard A. Gonser. From a small beginning of approximately 200 families, St. Julie Billiart now has 500 family units registered. Its territory is approximately three square miles of the city of North Ridgeville, which is 25 square miles. The first Pastoral Minister was Sr. Susan Wolf, SND, who began her duties in the summer of 1979. Since then, there have been two other Notre Dame sisters, Sr. Patricia Sylvester and Sr. Marie Manning.

Our parish profile is very unique. Average age is 35 years old; average stay in the parish is 3-1/2 years. The parish is blessed with few funerals (approximately 5/year) and many baptisms (30/year). Some of the spiritual highlights of this parish history have been the Christ Renews His Parish weekends for men and women, held in the fall and winter respectively. Christ Renews His Parish began in the fall of 1979 and is still continuing. The Diocesan wide RENEW program was introduced in 1988. The parish is fortunate to have many young couples willing and capable to serve in varied capacities such as Lector/commentator, PSR teachers, and songleaders.

The Parish Council is a very functioning part of the parish organization. It meets regularly on the fourth Thursday of every month. It consists of eight elected members and two ex-officio members, mainly the pastor and permanent deacon, John Rivera.

The parish has had one priest ordained from the ranks, Neil Walters, in 1989, and two permanent deacons, Lou Woyton and John Rivera. John currently assists at St. Augustine, West 14 in Cleveland and St. Julie's. Lou is also at St. Augustine.

The first parish rectory was at 5908 Emerald Drive, a brand new home donated for parish use by Frank Dettore, North ridge Investments, North Ridgeville. This two story colonial was occupied until June of 1980. Parish offices and residence were transferred to a new building at 5545 Opal Drive, located directly behind the church grounds. This 4,000 foot building includes a Chapel, offices for staff, and residence for the pastor. It is a very comfortable building that fits into the neighborhood surroundings. As this project was finished, planning began for the new Church Catechetical Center. A committee was formed, chairperson, Dan McNeil. Architect Kerri Illes was chosen to work with Star Builders of Amherst to design and construct a facility on the property facing 5500 Lear Nagle Road. The original 13 acres purchased by the diocese in 1978 was augmented by the one acre of land, which is the current site of the rectory. Ground breaking for new church was held the first week of June 1979. Parish volunteers worked with a local excavating company, Gilgenbach Construction, Dick Sullinger, president and parishioner, to prepare the site. Then on the first week of June five carpenters began construction of the facility augmented by other tradesmen. The Church and the Catechetical Center were completed in time for celebration of Mass Christmas Eve 1981. Over 600 parishioners were in attendance.

On the first day of school in the new year of 1982, a tornado like windstorm tore through our parish grounds as well as the school grounds of the public school next door and severely damaged their roof. As a gesture of goodwill the school children were invited to continue classes in the new facility of St. Julie Billiart. News of this was published in local and national newspapers.

North Ridgeville and the surrounding communities in Lorain county are currently experiencing a rapid expansion of housing. Efforts are being made at St. Julie Billiart to welcome new parishioners and to encourage lapse and inactive Catholics to return to church. "Vision '97" is being developed to work out a master plan for our parish activities and programs reaching into the year 2000. Plans are underway to redecorate the interior of the Church in celebration of our 20th anniversary on August 15, 1998. The parish is hopeful for continuing growth and deepening spiritual life through its many resources and activities.

## POSITIVE/NEGATIVE ASPECTS OF ST. JULIE BILLIART

February 2, 1997 Survey at all Masses

A wonderful place to worship the Lord. Small & very personable.  
 How the people have come together has made this parish the envy of the Diocese.  
 No enough of our parishioners come to Mass and support our Church.  
 Family oriented parish. Opportunity to meet people through parish activities.  
 Small, close parish.  
 Would like to see more involvement for parochial students together with PSR.  
 I like the wall of community pictures.  
 Would like to see the ministers of hospitality greet us on the way in, "open the doors to the house of the Lord."  
 I appreciate the community in this church—it is about people and not just the running through of catholic rituals at Mass.  
 Is there enough of?: Are we taking care of Father Gonser as we should? We appreciate him so.  
 Friendly atmosphere – no kneelers – coffee and donuts social. Suggestion for 20<sup>th</sup> anniversary – invite pas parishioners to our anniversary social.  
 Warm hospitality. Warm, friendly parish. Like 5:00 music.  
 Positive community, administration & setting. The parish is straightforward, uncomplicated & honest. All members given opportunity to participate & voice, offer ideas & comments.  
 Update church interior (already in progress). We must have more needed participation & Fr. Gonser can't do it all. Members ask members.  
 I really have a big criticism—why don't you all learn how to use the microphone? I know several people who do not come to Mass because you can't hear nothing or hardly anything you all say. One man is the only person that is really understood.  
 Family feeling (Negative) Ice in the parking lot. I sprained my ankle.  
 Have various activities for all ages – spiritual and other wise. Stations of the Cross needs to be improved-- add more narratives & music.  
 Bad – nothing. Good – Polka Mass.  
 Like Renew couples sharing. Renewal- Christian fellowship, sisters who become family. Prayer support-sisters who care, share and take care of each other and their families.  
 Not being able to fill the needs of our children to grow in their faith. Being too judgmental toward them instead of positive support.  
 Likes: Church community feeling; 5:00 Mass music; wonderful priest.  
 I like the parish activities. They need to increase, especially the Children's liturgy. This can be every Mass.  
 The friendliness and warmth. One thing I like about our church is nice and friendly people.  
 Pro: Choir/music—no church in Cuyahoga county has a choir like yours- guitars, upbeat music.  
 Con: Modernization –new carpets, chairs, etc.  
 The parish is very open and friendly, very family oriented, a lot of nice programs.  
 Children's liturgy is nice. No negatives here.

Good choir at 5:00. Lack sensitivity to parishioners at times. Expectation to get good speaker or presenter for students and advertise coming events.

Friendliness and spirituality. Small close unit. Sharing. Reach out to nursing homes and elderly.

The Most Important Positive -----Rev. Fr. Richard Gonser.

Could we have an evening Mass on Sundays? I often attend church in Fairview Sunday evening.

Positive: involvement of some members – RCIA, Renewal; Lack of program for 3, 4, 5 yr. Olds, sacraments not always at Mass.

I have belonged to St. Julie's for 5 yrs. I have enjoyed and spiritually it has helped me.

My family is raised. But have been impressed what you do for the young people.

There is much to be involved if one wants. Thank you.

Negative:??? Positive: being able to worship in our faith community on a regular basis.

An intimate faith community such as ours is wonderful. It would be nice to have a Retreat, not just a Renewal.

Love all the family activities and activities for different ages. Not a lot goes on in the evening. Most people work during day, some do during evening.

Do not like the new missalette and music. Too much confusion before 10:30 Mass. New missallettes are difficult to use. I like Fr. Gonser.

Very open and friendly. There is nothing for people between 40-55. Lots of things for children and over 55.

Jesus the bread. Jesus the wine. (KJW)

Too many social events that drain the budget. Nice friendly people. Spiritual Renewal (CRHP)

I like this place—it's like a second home. We need a Care Givers Workshop and support group.

I feel St. Julie Billiart is the most Christian Catholic Church I have ever attended both near Cleveland and in towns I have visited on vacation or traveling. When I am unable to attend Mass here, it doesn't seem as fulfilling.

Not enough deliberate, fervent prayer—focused on the primary mission of the church—evangelization & Discipleship!!! Loving, friendly community.

We need a committee to reach out to people that are not coming to church, even for a few weeks. If it is longer they need a personal visit. They need to feel needed and wanted and missed.

Peace & quiet. Too money oriented. Why subsidize schools when there are many good public schools?

Need more charity drives. Parish events.

Keep the Orange. All I see is \$\$\$\$. I do not replace functional interior at home and can not afford it! Why spend money for this.

Integration of various ministry components into mainstream program (i.e. social justice, evangelization, Pro life into liturgy, Rel. Ed., etc. Cut back on # of program/ministry options & emphasize Missions, Seasonal catechesis, etc. core essentials for fuller participation—coordinate with master calendar—identify key people helping match up veterans with new invitees. Out reach into parish & N.R. community.

Strong feeling of community and good family feeling. The fact we are reflecting more growth is positive. Our activities/spirit is our strength—are there too many?

Positive: everyone is welcome-everyone dresses up nicely to praise our Creator – Refreshments are served.

Negative: None really, but strongly suggest that WE MUST SING with praise & not withholding the vocal cords. Thank you.

Many of the physical characteristics exist in this parish which are supportive of a spiritual growth. Many have found this nurturing. Many programs in the parish strongly support spiritual life.

It is helpful when the priest and members of the parish can become more personable & perhaps a little less formal outside of their inner circles. This make approaching them & coming into a life in the parish a little bit less intimidating. Yours in Christ.

Need a nice Cry room like St. Peter's has.

I hear there are mice in the kitchen. We need either an exterminator and/or a parish cat!

ST. JULIE BILLIART ----- A GOLD STAR

What I like: Fr. Gonser and the women I've met in planning to attend the renewal weekend. What I don't like: The golf balls aren't so bad. They remind me of a sport I'm trying to learn?

+Feeling of community – Small size. Positive: sense of community in parish/Negative: Need more adult social activities.

I like the way the liturgy is celebrated. Need dress code for coir and ushers.

Thing to do: tell the song page if different that the boards. Place on the board the verses of a song if less than all. Use a hands free mike. We need to improve the entry sign and post routes for the church. Good things; The church provides a good environment for our family.

Singing. Friendly parishioners. Need crying room. Too much noise and distraction during Mass.

Positive: Fr. Gonser -- Negative: Masses do not start on time. They start LATE!

Positive: community oriented – uplifting and open. Negative: would like livelier, upbeat music(sometimes) so that more people will sing. People to introduce themselves (just name) when sharing sign of peace. This will help us grow and know each other.

I would like to revive the Saturday morning prayer meetings for men. (Scriptural sharing once a month).

I enjoy the community and closeness that our parish reflects. Let's Keep it up.

Positive: Fr. Gonser's consistent positive and appreciative feedback/approach to weekly collections. We are always aware that more would be needed but he doesn't try to shame his contributors.

Negative: Orange color scheme in church. When redecorating, maybe consider a more soothing emerald green.

I like the Father.

Friendliness. Lack of mindfulness.

Like choir and Frank on Sundays and friendly people. Father needs to be more thorough on Gospels.

I love everything that goes on at St. Julie. The warmth, and sincere friends. I cannot think of anything negative.

Need better music. The welcoming each person receives as they come in is a great asset to St. Julies. It tells the community they are welcome here. Each mass needs to



- follow the responsorial that is in the missalette or give out a flyer with the response on it they will use so everyone can follow.
- Neg. Too orange. Pos. Friendly people.
- Wonderful singing by the family choir. Makes me want to sing out also!
- Warm feeling from the parishioners – openness. Father to have more patience with parishioners.
- I enjoy the mass service, the people and the friendship of all after the service, and Father B. I wish sermons would focus more on the meaning of the readings. Sometimes it does, but sometimes it drifts a little.
- Positive: Good feelings of closeness with parishioners-- family like. Excellent Choir!
- Negative: Zero
- Something Good: Community (coffee and donuts in the church after Mass). Youth choir needs more help and support, needs to be talked at
- Positive: 5:00 Choir. Negative: Not enough children projects to keep them interested in Church.
- Has a lot of activities for young and old.
- Positive: 5 o'clock Mass choir – Wow! The flowers and decorations. Excellent guidance from our pastor. Also lots of activities and low-keyed encouragement to participate.
- Negative: the color of the carpet and chairs is bad – it's out. Go neutral next time.
- The people are very friendly. Fr. Gonser's negativeness to people who can't be involved in the parish.
- Positive: Renewal, RCIA, PSR, Coffee and donuts. Negative: I would like more activity in the Mass – an example- family mass with children invited forward for children related family and potluck supper following –or- polka mass-Raggae mass. More group and people involvement- People need to remember they are her to serve – no to be served.
- Warm, friendly atmosphere. Lots of folks involved, take ownership. Sunday Masses start late too often.
- Many activities. Excellent choir. Do not see anything negative.
- Real community feeling – friendly- effort to provide activities for all. Would like to see more bible study and study opportunities.
- I like smallness of parish. We need a way to minister to hurting—healing of physical and emotional hurts (continuing ministry).
- What I like: Father Gonser – Friendliness of the church.
- Positive: Small – always looking for ways to get people involved.
- Good music – No negatives.
- Pro: Love the warmth and closeness of this church community. Con: Need a better Sunday Choir and the rust-orange altar background definitely needs to be updated, along with altar carpet.
- I like the services and the way my priest runs the church. It's very personal and friendly. Do not like singing same old songs at 5pm Mass.
- Like getting together after Mass with coffee. It feels like family.
- Good PSR program. I like the family activities. Good sense of community.
- Needs improvement: We need to be more visible to the community – a lot of people still don't know we are here. Please update the music at Mass. We need more contemporary songs and make the music a little more lively.

All is fine as is.

Like the bass with choir~~~ Mixed messages: Example: Don't vote for casino gambling.

Promote trips to Las Vegas in weekly bulletin.

I love St. Julie Billiart and Father Gonser.

Music needs to be livelier. Currently it does not reflect the joy of Christ.

I wish St. Julie's was in my neighborhood.

For: The Reconciliation Services are great! Keep it up. Against: Nothing.

I enjoy the sense of belonging I have received since becoming a parish member. This parish is to be commended on its welcoming to new parishioners.

Music at 5:00 is very uplifting. Need better prepared homilies and not rushed service.

(This week's homily was good)

Positive: The kind people. Negative: Low attendance.

The community feeling is wonderful here at St. Julie's Father does a great job of getting everyone involved.

\*\* \*We enjoy the beautiful and uplifting music each week. The choir does a great job!

We enjoy Father's warm and sincere manner to all people. This church and its people are a wonderful reflection of God's love.

## Church Attitude Data Code

WHCSLEVA 1I 2a. What would cause you to leave this parish for another  
 Measurement level: Nominal  
 Format: A8 Column Width: 8 Alignment: Right  
 Missing Values: '99'

Value	Label
1	relocation out of area
10	poor quality preaching
11	physical appearance of church
12	too much concern over money issues
13	spiritual needs not being met
14	personal conflicts
15	bad example of parish staff
16	transfer to parish with day school
2	family goes to a different parish
3	change in pastors
4	poor education programs
5	inconvenient liturgy schedule
6	little opportunity for personal involvement
7	changes in community outreach
8	members not friendly or welcoming
9	uncaring pastor

WHCSLEVB II 2b. What would cause you to leave this parish for another  
 Measurement level: Nominal  
 Format: A8 Column Width: 8 Alignment: Right  
 Missing Values: '99'

Value	Label
1	relocation out of area
10	poor quality preaching
11	physical appearance of church
12	too much concern over money issues
13	spiritual needs not being met
14	personal conflicts
15	bad example of parish staff
16	transfer to parish with day school
2	family goes to a different parish
3	change in pastors
4	poor education programs
5	inconvenient liturgy schedule
6	little opportunity for personal involvement
7	changes in community outreach
8	members not friendly or welcoming
9	uncaring pastor

WHCSLEVC II 2c. What would cause you to leave this parish for another  
 Measurement level: Nominal  
 Format: A8 Column Width: 8 Alignment: Right  
 Missing Values: '99'

Value	Label
1	relocation out of area
10	poor quality preaching
11	physical appearance of church
12	too much concern over money issues
13	spiritual needs not being met
14	personal conflicts
15	bad example of parish staff
16	transfer to parish with day school
2	family goes to a different parish
3	change in pastors
4	poor education programs
5	inconvenient liturgy schedule
6	little opportunity for personal involvement
7	changes in community outreach
8	members not friendly or welcoming
9	uncaring pastor

WHCSLEVD II 2d. What would cause you to leave this parish for another  
 Measurement level: Nominal  
 Format: A8 Column Width: 8 Alignment: Right  
 Missing Values: '99'

Value	Label
1	relocation out of area
10	poor quality preaching
11	physical appearance of church
12	too much concern over money issues
13	spiritual needs not being met
14	personal conflicts
15	bad example of parish staff
16	transfer to parish with day school
2	family goes to a different parish
3	change in pastors
4	poor education programs
5	inconvenient liturgy schedule
6	little opportunity for personal involvement
7	changes in community outreach
8	members not friendly or welcoming
9	uncaring pastor

WHCSLEVE 11 2e. What would cause you to leave this parish for another  
 Measurement level: Nominal  
 Format: A8 Column Width: 7 Alignment: Right  
 Missing Values: '99'

Value	Label
1	relocation out of area
10	poor quality preaching
11	physical appearance of church
12	too much concern over money issues
13	spiritual needs not being met
14	personal conflicts
15	bad example of parish staff
16	transfer to parish with day school
2	family goes to a different parish
3	change in pastors
4	poor education programs
5	inconvenient liturgy schedule
6	little opportunity for personal involvement
7	changes in community outreach
8	members not friendly or welcoming
9	uncaring pastor

PESRFREC III 1. People are searching for a friendly faith community.  
 Measurement level: Scale  
 Format: F8 Column Width: 8 Alignment: Right  
 Missing Values: 9

Value	Label
1	strongly agree
2	agree
3	disagree
4	strongly disagree

PECHOTHP III 2. People check out other parishes before joining.  
 Measurement level: Scale  
 Format: F8 Column Width: 8 Alignment: Right  
 Missing Values: 9

Value	Label
1	strongly agree
2	agree
3	disagree
4	strongly disagree

Pre-testing of Focus Group . . . March 10, 2002  
St. Julie Billiard Church, North Ridgeville, Ohio

**Hypothesis . . . Inactive Catholics are returning to active membership in the parish with specific agendas.**

The primary research question is: Are these returnees looking primarily for a faith community?

I am going to start out with a general question and then start the process of funneling the rest of the questions to specific areas. My subsets of ten questions are as follows.

1. List one reason why an inactive Catholic would return to the church at this time?
2. Is an inactive catholic one who has been missing Mass almost all the time in the past five years?
3. Has anybody confided in you recently why they have returned to the church?
4. Name one feature in this parish that would attract new parishioners?
5. Would the liturgy, i.e., celebration of Sunday Mass, attract membership?
6. Would you consider the environment, i.e., physical location and grounds, attractive?
7. Is hospitality a prime factor for new members?
8. Is a strong youth program important for membership?
9. Is a solid religious education program important for the children?
10. What is the most important reason to belong to a parish?

Four men and four women gathered at the parish meeting room in the rectory at 1:00 p.m. for an hour and fifteen minutes for the focus group on Sunday, March 10, 2002. As the moderator I hand picked these parishioners with several factors in mind. They were between thirty and fifty years old. They were relatively unknown to each other. Finally they were in the parish from four months to ten years.

After the brief opening remarks in which I thanked them for coming, assured them of the confidentiality of the session, said that this was to gather information and that it would be relaxing and enjoyable, I then asked them for a short introduction.

**Agnes . . .** parishioner ten years, purchasing director United Methodist Village, age 45

**Dagny . . .** parishioner for four months, stay at home mom, age 30

**Sharon . . .** parishioner for four years, hair stylist, age 31

**Georgia . . .** six months a parishioner, dietician, age 30

**Craig . . .** one and a half years in the parish, broadcast manager for WEOL, age 48

**Matt** . . . four years in parish, self-employed computer programmer, age 32

**Rich** . . . five months in parish, accountant, age 34

**Mike** . . . nine months in parish, estimator, 30.

One variable that was very evident was that every participant except Agnes chose to belong to the parish since they had all looked at other churches before joining St. Julie Billiart.

**My hypothesis in proposing this focus group is that the inactive Catholic who seeks active membership in a parish is returning with a specific agenda.** Through the ten questions that I proposed to the eight members I intend to get a list of reasons that motivate a returning Catholic.

**First Question: List one reason why an inactive Catholic would return to the church at this time.**

Three of eight said that religious education of children was a primary reason. The others listed the following: seeking peace, resolution of a problem, a healing, example of partner, changing priorities.

**Second Question: Is an inactive Catholic one who has been missing Mass almost all the time in the past five years?**

As soon as the answers started to flow it was very evident that everybody had a different idea about what defines an inactive Catholic. The probe question then quickly resolved to define an inactive catholic. Three out of eight said that missing Mass regularly and not receiving the sacraments constitute being an inactive Catholic. The others were very strong in their opinion that conscience is a big factor in being an active Catholic. **Agnes** said, "I could be at home, reading my bible and have a quiet place to pray, have all the symbols of a Catholic environment but not go to Church. This does not classify me as an inactive Catholic." **Georgia** said, "My father doesn't attend Mass regularly but prays every day. I think it is more what a person does in his life. You can have a person going to church every Sunday but not be a good person the rest of the week. It is an individual thing based in the interpretation of what they think is a practicing Catholic." **Richard** said, "Shut-ins have ways to be active. TV Mass and communion calls." This discussion about the inactive Catholic could easily be the subject of a focus group.

**Third Question: Has anybody confided in you recently why they have returned to the church?**

This was obviously not a question that elicited any responses. Nobody said that they had this experience. **Matt** said that he knows two families in the area that have young kids and have returned to church because of their desire to bring them up in this parish. . A probe question was: Is this a private matter that people just don't talk about? There was no agreement from the group. So the questioning was not continued.

**Fourth Question: Name one feature in the parish that would attract new parishioners.**

Everybody commented on the friendliness of the parish from the pastor to the parishioners that they first encountered in attending Mass. They liked the sense of community, unity, and family.

**Richard** said that this church scared his parents because they are very traditional. **Dagny's** response is worth quoting. "The first time I came to this parish it seemed like such a sense of community. Everybody was so friendly. We went to St. Peter's parish--we move every three years. We have always lived on a military base and are use to going to church on base and, of course, there is a huge sense of community. But going to St. Peter's, we almost felt like an inactive Catholic. Just checking the box--and going to mass--we went every Sunday, never saw the same faces, felt like a number, just one of many. I don't mean to downplay St. Peter's, but it was not what we were looking for." With one exception, all said they had shopped for churches before they registered at St. Julie Billiart.

**Fifth Question: Would the Liturgy, the way we celebrate Mass, attract membership?**

All responses were very positive. They like the music, the participation of the congregation, the timely homilies. **Richard** said, "the Mass combined the best of the old and the new--not so much the way it is run--but the way it is perceived. Kind of modern--but still kind of comforting pattern that you find in the Catholic Church." **Mike** said you can feel the warmth during Mass that you don't get at other churches. **Agnes** liked the structure of the Mass. **Georgia** was surprised at the participation of the youth at Mass. She had not experienced this in other churches.

Halfway through the responses the discussion veered off to the opinions about standing and kneeling in church. Since St. Julie's has chairs and no kneelers the parishioners stand and sit during Mass. Some felt uncomfortable with this at first but finally adjusted. A probe question: Was this a hindrance to celebrating Mass. The answers were no, especially for people with handicaps and health problems.

After this, the discussion went to the quality of sermons at the parish. Since this was not a separate question I did allow the group to share their ideas about the homily. They were very complimentary on the quality, interest level, current application of timely events, and historical perspective. As the moderator I tried to be very impartial and uninvolved in this phase. It was difficult because they were talking about me and I was inwardly pleased that my sermons were getting better. The subject of Sunday homily could be another topic for a future focus group.

**Sixth Question: Would you consider the environment, physical location, and appearance of the church building attractive?**

Again the responses were favorable, ranging from remarks about the garden-like atmosphere of the parish property to the family and children, and the friendly interior of the church itself. The location of the church in the woods, a comfortable distance from the street, lends itself to a park-like atmosphere. **Dagny** said that every Sunday was like a mini-retreat. She also commented that she was surprised that so many people did not know where the parish was located. **Mike** said that it is like a retreat; no sound of cars going by sets the mood and relaxes you as you come into the nice setting. I had to bring the discussion back to the environment after a few comments started to stress the openness of the parish to young children. A few mothers said that they noticed that the parishioners are not offended by crying children in the church.

**Seventh Question: Is hospitality a prime factor for new members?**

All shook their heads yes emphatically to this question. **Sharon** said she thinks it is primary. **Mike** said that people choose this church because of the hospitality. **Matt** said that we want to connect with other people and it is possible here. **Craig** said the church should be the most



hospitable place and we have it here. **Rich** said that “this church serves for this type of community. There is a strong impulse for younger families to have this type of community. It is something that has been lost. You feel like you are alone. This helps break down that feeling and you want to be active.” A common statement was that they wanted to connect with people at the parish and they found it possible here.

**Eighth Question: Is a strong youth program important for membership?**

Their responses were very surprising in the sense that they had very favorable comments about the involvement of the youth at the parish...at mass, youth programs, trips, peer modeling, teaching in the PSR school. **Mike** said that “I know my children will not be going to a Catholic school and that this is one of the reasons why I came to this parish. Seeing what is here has reinforced my feelings about the parish. My kids will have something with the youth group here.” **Agnes** said, “I have to compliment the parish staff. Father is picking the right people to teach and work with our children. I feel very confident in that.” **Georgia** added, “It is nice to have the church to fall back on.”

**Ninth Question: Is a solid religious education program important for the children?**

Since this parish does not have a private school the answers are biased towards the PSR classes.

All the parents have children in the PSR classes. They all stated how important a good program is for them. **Agnes** said, “my son goes to public school (junior in high school), I feel this PSR program is very important.” Several liked the idea of having the classes on Sunday morning. One mother asked about the problem of children not going after classes to Mass. **Sharon**: “St. Julie’s has more advantages since it doesn’t have a private school attached to it. When I went to PSR there were no teen groups. Since St. Julie’s parish doesn’t have a school it can offer many more things to the PSR students.”

**Tenth Question: What is the most important reason to belong to a parish?**

One commented was that all the other nine reasons above are part of the answer. **Rich**: “It is like a wicker basket with all its intertwining weaves. All the parts make up the whole and each one contributes to its unity.” **Matt**: Community. **Agnes**: Belonging, commitment, connecting, all components are important. **Georgia**: a support system, relationship. **Craig**: sense of connection.

The focus session ended on time. I thanked them for their input, their honesty, and their affirmation that they gave me. I said that I would let them know the results. This information will form the basis of the second and final focus group to be held in the time frame between Easter Sunday and the last Sunday of May.

From the raw data that was presented in the session based on the ten questions I have listed the dominant factors that influence active membership.

1. A family with children seeks a parish primarily for religious education
2. A couple without children seek membership for very personal reasons that usually involve a previous rupture or minimal relationship with a parish in their youth.
3. From the sample of eight families surveyed seven out of eight actively searched for a parish before making a commitment.

- 4. The main feature that attracts membership is a sense of community or family orientation.**
- 5. Once committed to a chosen parish there is the need to promote the connection with other parishioners.**

From these statements I shall prepare ten questions for the focus group this spring. Again the hypothesis tentatively stated at this point is to discover the dominant reason that would encourage most inactive Catholics to return to active membership in a contemporary Catholic parish. I have a sense that there is a desire to return to a spirituality that was begun in the early formative years of childhood but was lost or damaged by the radical changes and currents in Catholicism in the post Vatican 2 years. The stress on community and connection can be interpreted in the spiritual sense of the desire to belong to a faith community, nourished by the Eucharist and the Word of God. The contemporary Catholic parish needs to fulfill this need if it is to be faithful to the mission of Jesus.

### Summary of Focus Group conducted at St. Julie Billiart Parish on April 28, 2002

Nine parishioners met at one o'clock in the parish rectory meeting room on Sunday afternoon to be participants in a focus group. As the moderator I welcome them, had them introduce themselves quickly to each other by giving their names, years in the parish, and occupation. I let them know that the session was being recorded by the tape recorder placed in the middle of the conference table. Also I had a secretary taking some notes in short hand during the session. I assured them this session was going to be very easy and enjoyable. I would see that each one would get a transcript of the session. Also I said that this session is just basically to get some information for my project about returning inactive Catholics.

My hypothesis this session was: **the returning inactive Catholic seeks a faith community that will provide a strong spiritual foundation.** I have nine questions that center on the basic reasons that motivate the returning inactive member. These questions were all answered in turn by the nine participants:

1. In seeking a new parish what are one or two dominant features that it must have?
2. How important is an invitation from a friend or neighbor to join a parish?
3. Do you believe it is necessary to check out other churches before joining a particular one?
4. Would dissatisfaction with a previous parish be the main reason to join a new parish?
5. Does the size of the parish membership limit your choices of parishes?
6. Do you have a strong need for spiritual growth in your parish involvement?
7. Does membership in a parish necessarily mean an active ministry for you?
8. How would you describe an active member in a parish?
9. How would you share with others the good news about your active parish?

#### A short profile of the participants:

Jim, 60 years old, five children, four years in parish, active member, banking background  
 Dagny, 32 years old, married, three children, homemaker, nine months in parish, no ministry  
 Steve, 52 years old, married, no children, machinist, very active in parish, nine years here  
 Susan, 37 years old, married, one girl, writer, attends Mass but no ministry yet, 2 years here  
 Tim, 41 years old, 3 children, 15 years in parish, horticulturist.  
 Keith, 37 years old, married, one son, five years in parish, civil engineer, attends Mass  
 Bernadette, married, one stepson, five years here, teacher and lawyer, 37 years old, council.  
 Manuel, five years in parish, not active, 33 years old, mortgage broker.  
 Felix, two years in parish, policeman, 56 years old, sacristan at church.

#### 1 In seeking a new parish what are one or two dominant features it must have?

Sue: meaningful homilies, opportunity for community service

Steve: to feel welcome, especially the first time you walk in the church.

Keith: comfort zone, the whole environment, no pressure, no hype.

Jim: in some big parishes you have to be part of the "in crowd" and it is difficult to break in. In a small parish you can participate and be recognized.

Bernie: activities and programs for children, especially for people in their 20's and 30's.

Manuel: a place where the children feel a part of it and be involved.

Tim: location and convenience, how far will someone travel to a parish. If you are not

real active, a convenience factor may come in.

**Felix:** pastor was deciding factor, he is visible after Masses on Sunday, good homilies, and facilitates parishioners.

## 2. How important is an invitation from a friend or neighbor to join a parish?

**Keith:** I was invited by a neighbor, didn't know about the parish until he spoke. It is important to get the word out.

**Dagny:** very important that when you move so much you'll go somewhere close to you.

**Susan:** my mother invited me to join this church. We found what we were looking for.

**Jim:** never hurts to talk about the church. Some like more structured churches.

**Steve:** an invitation is very powerful and meaningful.

**Bernie:** some people don't want to interact, so it doesn't matter whether they are invited or not. Some come because of our location.

**Felix:** A large church gets you lost in the crowd. Good to know that you are wanted.

**Probe question:** Many of you mentioned : found out what we were looking for. What is that?  
A combination of things. In other churches the priest didn't come down after Mass or go to the door to greet people. Where you were very visible after Mass. You talk to people. Family in front of us started talking to us. It is a feeling of welcoming. Opportunities to get involved for a lot of time or a small amount of time, depending where you are in your life. Your homily- not being talked down to- but we are in this together and here are some things to take with you during the week to help you.

## 3 Do you believe it is necessary to check out many churches before joining a particular one?

**Felix:** check to see who belongs to the parish and what are times of the service. We free lanced, not shopped to join a church but a parish

**Tim:** He never considered shopping around. When we moved and found St. Julie. It fit so well.

**Steve:** We did shop. We were away for 17 years. Was hesitant to return, liked the homilies.

**Dagny:** It is important to shop around to find a comfortable place so you don't feel like you are just "checking the box" If you are coming back to church you need to find your niche. You went away from the church for a reason and you don't want to find a church with those similarities.

**Keith:** We didn't shop, but this church just fit. But looking back, I was exposed to other churches, so I guess I did shop.

**Jim:** Leadership in the parish is very important, lead by example, be sincere. If you cannot relate to the leader of the church, you cannot just sit there and go through the motions, the whole thing is a fake. Your faith is part, is your involvement and participation.

**Manuel:** Find out what it is you like about each place. Can appreciate what you have.

Atmosphere can change in a couple years. When you are a different stage of your life. You may feel differently about a church.

**Susan:** We were attending another church and even went to an Episcopal Church-because they had what we were looking for. But finally started looking for a Catholic church that had what we wanted.

**Felix:** I am a Catholic, born and raised. I don't look for a priest, in the past they weren't that involved. People here are more like I am.

**Probe question:** Possibly people check out other denominations. Should we address that?

**Tim:** Some of our friends started out as Catholics and have checked out Lutheran Churches. Probably 2 or 3 people I know have done that.

**Dagny:** My husband would never think of going to another church. We would never consider another denomination.

**Susan:** we looked for something that was close to Catholic.

**Father:** Maybe in my questionnaire I should put: Would checking out a Protestant church be part of your looking for a parish?

#### **4. Would dissatisfaction with a previous parish be the main reason for joining a new parish?**

**Jim:** Yes, if you feel used or uncomfortable. After a while we didn't like what was going on in our church.

**Dagny:** there are many options, certainly look if you are not happy, why stay?

**Steve:** Change if you are not satisfied and not getting anything out of it.

**Susan:** some are disappointed but feel obligated to stay because of children in the school.

**Jim:** the school issue can definitely present a problem. After my free lancing, I decided to join the parish, and I am in for the good or the bad.

**Manuel:** Important to see the spiritual growth. It shouldn't be competition between churches. Marketing perspective a motive or not? It doesn't matter who the priest is, it is the faith. Some may be there for certain things ,music, etc. But others prefer to slip in and get their check mark.

#### **5. Does the size of the parish membership limit your choices of parishes?**

**Felix:** No, the parish needs to be able to accommodate the people. Size really doesn't matter.

**Tim :**Depends on personality, they need to feel comfortable.

**Steve:** Size of the church does not matter a whole lot, as long as you are getting something out of it. Need to have a comfort level.

**Jim:** In a small parish people ask you to get involved. It is hard to walk away from that. Some older people feel "locked" in by boundaries, but the younger ones don't feel that way.

**Bernie:** depends on the individual: a vibrant or active parish is important. Size is not important but how vibrant the parish is.

**Susan:** leadership is important. Who is up front of the church carries over in many ways.

**Tim:** let people know that there are choices, small, active, laid back, etc. Don't always know what is available to them.

**Steve:** Many live outside the parish but come here because of the comfort level.

**Bernie:** Still some confusion at the chancery about church boundaries. Give out information only about the parish in which the inquirer is living.

**Dagny:** Wasn't aware there were church boundaries. Maybe because we move so often. Age has a lot to do with it. Time factor plays a role.

## 6. Do you have a strong need for spiritual growth in your parish involvement?

**Tim:** Not just growth, but maintenance and support. Sitting in church on Sunday and looking at other people worshipping the way I do, I feel that is support.

**Jim:** If you join a parish you are there for spiritual growth. Don't need to join for social activities. I don't think you join not to grow. How much you get out of it is something else.

**Keith:** Our programs contribute to spiritual growth.

**Bernie:** People with children are seeking opportunities so they can be better parents. To be able to answer your child's questions about the faith.

**Manuel:** Try to set the best example for your children. It forces you to be better and reexamine your faith.

**Felix:** Some adults are coming from "non-practicing" homes and now with children they want to be practicing Catholics.

**Steve:** Mass is not enough to fulfill you- need to increase your growth by getting involved in other programs (men's renewal, cursillo)

## 7. Does membership in a parish necessarily mean an active ministry for you?

You are registered, may not go to church every week because of illness or other reasons. You are supporting it sacramentally. That is the minimum. What do you mean by active?

**Dagny:** It means to have that feeling of belonging. We are as active as time allows. I tell anybody I talk to, to call me if I can help. We are not well known. But now people come up to us and are getting to know us. Moving a lot, it makes a difference. It doesn't mean to be present at a lot of things. There are time constraints.

**Felix:** It is important to be active. When I was "free lancing" I was worshipping but something was missing. I wanted to help and feel like I belonged.

**Susan:** The activities help me to feel like I belong. When we joined our sense of belonging came from our activities. The more we did, helped us feel a sense of belonging.

**Steve:** Being active becomes community in our circle. We become more like a family. My family has grown through being active at this parish.

**Keith:** An active member doesn't have to be visible. Just talking with people and promoting things. Can be behind the scenes.

## 8. How would you describe an active member in a parish?

**Keith:** One that volunteers and does promote with everybody. Met a lot of people and faces that become familiar. Knowing, talking and sharing.

**Steve:** Someone who has a hard time saying no. You don't want to get burned out because then you feel like you're not as active and not belonging to the community.

**Bernie:** Some are active because they serve on multiple committees. But there are very active people, involved in only one aspect, some really give something valuable to the parish.

**Keith:** Was surprised to see the number of people at the Appreciation Brunch. Where did they come from?

**Felix:** You don't have to be a committee member, show your support by attending various functions.

**Tim:** Do we want to discount those people who want to stay invisible, but have an active faith life? Do you have to volunteer or attend to be active? Some people want to be quiet.

**Bernie:** good point.

**Dagny:** Active can have many levels. You can make it a point to sign up to help the cause. Just to make one commitment is good. You're an active member even if you put down your name to y waffles for IHN.

Most churches are always quiet; we don't have that here because we are a very social type. But sometimes I feel for those who do come to church and have a lot on their minds and want to be quiet. You have to understand that.

#### **9. How would you share with others the good news about your active parish?**

**Bernie:** I talk about activities I do with the church. It comes up in conversation with neighbors, etc.

**Tim:** talking with neighbors or coworkers and invite them to come.

**Steve:** make comments about different activities- talking it up.

**Susan:** I teach girl scouts about activities we do. Just natural to talk about church.

**Jim:** A positive experience you talk about easily.

**Felix:** In general conversation. When people ask you what you are doing- you'll talk.

**Steve:** If you are not involved, the conversation about church doesn't come up too much. You are proud of your parish and that is what keeps you coming back.

**Keith:** You don't have to be involved to talk about it.

**Dagny:** It depends on the situation. She is working on getting a friend to try St. Julie.

The focus group discussion last one hour and twenty minutes. After thanking them for the input I gave a short review of the remarks.

My consensus is from all of you that a welcoming, comfort zone is important in a parish. It helps to be asked to join a church. Most feel it a good idea to check out other churches. Freelancing is a good term to describe it. You want a place where you feel comfortable. Do not want to go back to a parish that had problems you didn't like before. Stick with the parish now through good and bad. There is some competition between parishes. Size of membership doesn't matter particularly. Depends on personality. Newcomers are looking not so much for spiritual growth, per se, but maintenance and support. One can be active by being just silent and visible. Do not have to be on every committee. Talking about your parish comes naturally.

This was a very good focus group. No one person was dominant. All contributed to the input. Some key phrases keep reoccurring that will be helpful for the summer project (questionnaire) Welcoming, freelancing, comfort zone, comfortable, active not necessarily involved openly. Maintenance and support. Church as family.

September 10, 2002

Dear Mr. Harold Smith

You are invited to one of two meetings at the church in October. The purpose of the meeting is to fill out a survey that seeks information about the reasons why parishioners are registering. The survey hopes to discover the values and concerns that motivate Catholics to return to active membership and to continue ministry in the parish. Your participation in this process will help me to continue my work on a project that will eventually culminate in a doctor of ministry degree.

If you are able to attend either the first or the second Sunday in October please call my office by the end of the month so that I can prepare for this session. It will begin at one in the afternoon and should be finished within forty-five minutes. As a special incentive for all the participants there will be a raffle of four Giant Eagle gift certificates of twenty-five dollars apiece.

If you have any questions about this project or survey please call me. Your responses to this survey will be kept confidential. All the participants are asked to meet in the back of the church where tables will be set up for the survey.

Sincerely yours, in Christ,

Rev. Richard A Gonser, Pastor



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traditional religious symbols today be interpreted in view of the modern interpretant's experiences of public and ordinary life?

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Randall, Robert L. *What People Expect from Church*. Nashville: Abingdon Press, 1992. In five simple chapters Randall identifies the common needs of people who are searching for church membership. The yearnings to feel understood, to understand, to belong, and finally to hope in the Church are clearly discussed.

Roebben, Bert. *Do we still have faith in young people? A west European answer to the evangelization of young people in a postmodern world*. Religious Educator. Vol. 90 #3/4 Summer/Fall 1995. The main premise of the article is that young people would find inspiration in Christian faith if those who communicate this faith profess their faith in young people. Credibility can be won by authenticity and consistency, by the strength of one's arguments, and by the power of one's life witness.

Roll, Susan. *Alienated Catholics and a Penitent Church*. Doctrine and Life 41:338-44 S 1991. Roll quotes James Lopresti, S.J., to describe those who are alienated from the church. There are three kinds: the unawakened, the true alienated, and the prophetically alienated.

Sample, Tex. *The Spectacle of Worship in a Wired World. Electronic Culture and the Gathered People of God*. Nashville: Abingdon Press: 1998. An engaging description of the shift in electronic media and entertainment. Interesting concepts about use of sound, image and visualization to define spectacle.

Sanders, E.P. *Paul and Palestinian Judaism*. Minneapolis: Fortress Press, 1977. Sanders is one of the early leading proponents of the new look of the apostle Paul. His thesis that Paul was the apostle to the gentiles and that salvation for all, Jew or Greek, was through Christ alone goes against the traditional view of Paul's theology. Chapter Five on Paul should be read thoroughly to understand Sanders' hypothesis.

Saunders, Stanley P. and Campbell, Charles, L. *The Word on the Street*. Grand Rapids, MI.: Eerdmans Publishing Company, 2000. This book, at first glance, may not seem to dwell on the theory of preaching. But a close reading of the personal experiences of the authors in a very special urban setting will have a dramatic impact on the reader.

Slater, Don. *Consumer Culture and Modernity*. Malden, Ma.: Polity Press: 1997. A very comprehensive survey of the history and theories of economics. Third chapter on Consumption versus Consumer is very informative.

Soards, Marion. *The Apostle Paul...An Introduction to His Writings and Teachings*. Mahwah, N.J.: Paulist Press, 1987. Soard's book is an excellent introduction to the recent interest in Paul the writer and Paul the pastoral leader. The seven undisputed letters are clearly described and identified in the context of the Roman world of Paul's time.

\_\_\_\_\_. *New International Biblical Commentary, I Corinthians*. Peabody, Ma.: Hendrickson Publishers, Inc.: 1999. An excellent and insightful book on the life and times of St. Paul and the reasons behind his problems with the Corinthian congregation. Soards' book is especially helpful because of the special introductions to key chapters of St. Paul. Reader should use the New International Version of the New Testament as key reference.

Sofied, Loughlan and Juliano, Carroll. *Collaboration...Uniting Our Gifts in Ministry*. Notre Dame, IN.: Ave Maria Press, 2000. This book presents a clear and comprehensive study of practical strategies to help pastoral ministers to be effective leaders. The summaries and reflective questions at the end of every chapter are very helpful.

Soukup, Paul A. (editor). *Media, Culture and Catholicism*. Kansas City: Sheed and Ward, 1996. Article by Walter Ong on Media and Theology. Essays by fifteen different authors give a wide spectrum of influence of media in current theology.

Spencer, Jim. *Catholic Dropouts those who left & those who are left behind.* U. S. Catholic 1:35-40 F 1986. Stories of bitterness, pain, and sadness that have occurred when members of Catholic families join other faiths. Basic response is to pray and be patient with them.

Stone, Bryan P. *Faith and Film...Theological Themes at the Cinema*. St. Louis, Missouri: Chalice Press, 2000. The author incorporates the articles of the Apostles Creed to identify themes of faith in modern cinema. An imaginative preacher could benefit from a reading of this book to reach audiences that can identify with themes of belief and morality in the movie genre.

Sweester, Thomas and Forster, Patricia: *Transforming the Parish...Models for the Future*. Kansas City, Mo.: Sheed and Ward: 1993.  
This book is the result of twenty years of research with parishes across the United States through the Parish Evaluation Project. It projects models for the future in the areas of spirituality, small faith communities, liturgy, faith development, volunteers and freeing structures. The structure at the end of each chapter is a practical approach for review and prayerful reflection. Chapter nine by Vincent Donovan on *Refounding Church- a paradigm shift*, is worth reading carefully.



\_\_\_\_\_, *The Catholic Parish*. Chicago, Ill.: Center for the Scientific Study of Religion: 1994. Sweester defines four levels of parish involvement: nuclear, modal, marginal, and nominal. There are interesting studies of shifting membership in ten Chicago parishes. Book worth reading to identify reasons for this complicated phenomenon.

Verity, Peter. *The Angry Frustrated and Forgotten Ones..* Priest & People. 1:26-9 April 1987. Verity relates stories of former Catholics to stress the need for a practical spirituality to reach these people. A reasoned discussion on the theology of the Cross is offered as a practical way to heal and begin reconciliation.

Wilkes, Paul. *Excellent Catholic Parishes*. Mahwah, N. J.: Paulist Press: 2001. Eight Parishes in the continental United States are profiled in the easily read book. The final sector lists a survey of common traits of what makes parishes successful.

Warren, Michael, editor. *Changing Churches. The Local Church and the Structures of Change*. Portland, Oregon: Pastoral Press, 2000. This book consists of essays by noted theologians who describe the emerging image of church through the cultural scene. It does challenge the pastoral teams to be creative and highly adaptive to meet the needs of the modern Christian.

Wogaman, J. Philip. *Speaking the Truth in Love. Prophetic Preaching to a Broken World* Louisville, Kentucky. Westminster John Knox Press: 1998. First part focuses on meaning and application of prophetic preaching. Second half of book consists of series of sermons preached at Foundry United Methodist Church, Washington, D.C., from 1992 to 1998.

## Further Readings

- Brennan, Patrick J. *Parishes that excel-Models of Excellence in Education, Ministry and Evangelization*. N.Y.: Crossroad. 1992
- Congregation for the Clergy. *The Priest and the Third Christian Millenium: Teacher of the Word, Minister of the Sacraments, and Leader of the Community*. U.S.Catholic Conference: Washington, D.C. 1999.
- Dunn, Julia. *Inactive Catholic*. New Covenant. 209-14. Ja.1991.
- Gaillaradetz, Richard R. *Teaching with Authority-A Theology of the Magisterium in the Church*. Collegeville, Mn.: Liturgical Press. 1997.
- Kollar, Judith Ann. *A User-Friendly Parish-Become a More Welcoming Community*. Mystic, Ct.: Twenty-Third Publications. 1998.
- Kress, Robert. *Membership and Leadership in the Church*. The Jurist.42. no.1.29-69. 1982.
- Lewis, James W. *Baby Boomers: The Lapsed and the Loyal*. Christian Century. May 18-25. 1994.
- McClory, Robert. *Why did the Catholic cross the road?* U.S.Catholic 56:6-12 Jan.1991.
- McKee, William F. *Inactive Catholics: Calling them Home*. Liguorian.78.14-19 F. 1990.
- \_\_\_\_\_. *An Epistle from inactive Catholics*. Priest 40: 37-40 Ap.1984
- Roebben, Bert. *Do we still have faith in young people? A West European answer to the evangelization of young people in a postmodern world*. Religious Educator.Vol 90#3. Summer/Fall 1995.
- Spencer, Jim. *Catholic Dropouts-those who left and those who are left behind*U. S. Catholic 51:35-40F. 1986
- Sweetser, Thomas P. S.J. *The Parish as Covenant-A Call to Pastoral Partnership*. Franklin, Wisconsin: Sheed & Ward. 2001.
- Tracey, David. *The uneasy alliance unconceived-Catholic Theological Method, Modernity and Postmodernity*. Theological Studies 50. 1989.
- U.S.Catholic Conference. English Translation of the *Catechism of the Catholic Church* for the United States of America. N.Y.: Doubleday. 1995.